

Mass Effect: Clash of Civilizations

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Summary: In 2157 a Citadel Council exploratory vessel is tasked with opening a dormant Relay into unknown regions of the galaxy. What they find is something they never expected. What happens when two civilizations centered around different technologies clash?

## 1. Chapter 1: Great Discovery

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><p>Chapter 1: Great Discovery</p>

Unknown System, 2157

On board the Council exploration vessel \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_

Captain Alenna T'Velos paced back and forth through the CIC as her multi-racial crew went about their duties. She skimmed through her data pad again, making sure the ships readouts were normal. It was unnecessary; her Sensor Operator would immediately notify her if anything unexpected came up. Still, she liked to be well informed of everything that occurred on her ship. The Council entrusted her with not only the command of one of the Citadel's elite exploration vessels, but also the lives of her crew, which she took very seriously.

"How much longer until we exit FTL?" she asked.

"We will be arriving in unknown system in 2 minutes" came the quick reply of Forbin, the ships Salarian navigational officer.

"Good, bring the \_\*\*Seloria's\*\*\_ scanners and sensors online, I want a full scan of the system as soon as we enter".

Alenna was tasked with opening a new Relay path to the unexplored Tyroggan Arm of the galaxy. This large swath of the galaxy - an area which spanned roughly 15% of the Milky Way - has perplexed scientists for millennia. The Mass Relays reached every corner of the galaxy except the Tyroggan Arm. There were many theories as to why that was. Many believed that the Protheans - the creators of the Mass Relays - had not yet developed the Mass Relay network there before their mysterious disappearance. Others believed that the Council has simply not encountered any Relays entering the area. The more wild extranet theories claimed that the Tyroggan Arm was actually the place of origin of the Protheans themselves who, after conquering the galaxy, for some unknown reason receded back to the Tyroggan arm and cut off all Relays entering into their territory.

Whatever the truth was the Council would soon find out, thanks to the discovery of a dormant Relay on the outer edge of Council space. This Relay - dubbed Relay 314 - was accidentally discovered by a Volus mining corporation that was scanning for unmapped resource rich systems. After contacting the Citadel of the find, a science team was dispatched to investigate. What they found stunned them. According to the Relays navigation logs, its connecting Relay led into the Tyroggan Arm. Furthermore the connecting Relay was a Prime Relay, which connected to dozens of other Relays across the unexplored area of the galaxy. With the coordinate location retrieved, an exploration team was sent to open the connecting Prime Relay.

Captain Alenna was selected by the Council Exploration Committee (CEC) to open the network. Unlike other Asari, who began to settle down once they hit the Matron stage, Alenna had chosen to continue doing what she loved - exploring. And with more than 150 years of command experience in the CEC, she was the prime choice for this mission.

"All systems are online and functional. We will be exiting FTL in 1 minute. Preparing FTL exit protocols." Lenora, the ships sensor operator reported.

Alenna nodded and once again looked at the briefings from the science report of Relay 314. Being chosen to be one of the first to explore the mysterious and long romanticized Tyroggan Arm was a dream come true for her. Deep down she was hoping to the Goddess that she would make some incredible discovery; perhaps an ancient alien civilization or a new space faring race. However she knew not to get her hopes up. Odds were that they would encounter nothing more interesting than uninhabitable rocks and asteroids.

"Exiting in 5, 4, 3, 2â€|"

As soon as the ship exited FTL the crew went into action. The \*\*Seloria\*\* was equipped with the best sensor technology in Council space. Alenna watched the main display screen as information flooded in.

Lenora listed through the important data. "Yellow Dwarf Star. Five planets, the fourth being a gas giant. One large asteroid belt on the outer rim. Butâ€|"

"What is it?" Alenna asked, sensing Lenora's hesitation.

"I can't find the Relay. It should be|wait, here it is!" She brought up the 5th planet in the system. "The Relay should be orbiting this planet. There's only one object orbiting it." The moon of the planet appeared on screen. "The Relay must be here, encased in ice".

"Are you sure?"

"There's no other possibility" Lenora replied confidently.

Alenna frowned. Mass Relays being encased in ice was not unheard of, but it was rare. It usually occurred to Relays that have been dormant for a long time. It wouldn't hinder the team's mission. As soon as they send the Mass Relay code the Relay would receive the transmission and 'power up'. The ice would then break off as the ancient machine came to life. It did mean however that they would probably have to wait a day or two for the debris to clear up after activation before going through back to Relay 314.

"Alright. Send the activation signal. And get me a more thorough scan of the system."

Lenora resumed her scanning as Korven, the Turian signal operator nodded and sent the signal to the Relay. Upon receiving the transmission, the Relay's two counter rings began spinning. The mass effect core materialized in the center. And after over 50,000 years of dormancy, the massive monolith roared to life. The moon sized encasing ice began to crack, then violently broke off. Massive chunks of ice the size of continents began to drift away, finally revealing the ancient machine for the first time in eons.

"Mass effect core energy readings are stable. Relay is online and ready for use" Fobin said. A throng of cheers, claps, and thumps erupted among the crew. Alenna smiled. Her mission was a complete success, and more importantly, her team has just opened the gateway to the last section of the unknown.

"Send an FTL transmission to the Citadel. Tell them the Relay is online but not yet ready for travel."

"Yes Captain" Korven replied, his mandibles still clicked into a smile. After seven weeks of FTL travel across unknown space inside rather cramped living conditions, they could now travel back virtually instantaneously thanks to the now opened Relay. The tension in the ship was one of relief. Congratulations, handshakes, and even hugs were given as others talked about how they would spend their next shore leave. Everyone in the CIC was cheerful; except one.

Lenora stared hard at the incoming data from the ships sensors. At first she thought the anomaly was a glitch. She rescanned again to make sure. Her eyes lit up as the scans once again returned with the same data. If they were accurate, than the second planet from the sun was a garden world. But that wasn't what surprised her. For on her LADAR screen appeared to be thousands of pieces of unnatural metals orbiting the planet. Andâ€|one \_very\_ large structureâ€|branching off the planet into space? She blinked, not sure what to make of it. One thing was certain. The large - whatever it was - was not natural. A giddy feeling arose in her stomach and she smiled.

"Captain!" Lenora yelled in excitement, interrupting some of the crew congratulations. "I think I found something incredible."

Alenna turned to Lenora with a quizzical expression. "What did you find?"

Lenora didn't hesitate. "After the more thorough scans came through, it appears the second planet is a garden world."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes. The planet has liquid water and a breathable atmosphere of nitrogen and oxygen. However a large area of the planet appears to be scorched." Lenora brought the scans of the planet on screen. Alenna looked at the data; the planet had a variety of green, blue, and brown colors. And just as Lenora said, there was a large scar across the surface - blackened and dead. She pondered on what could have caused this. It definitely was not a meteorite that much she knew. Perhaps a large volcanic explosion, caused by massive shift in tectonic plates?

Lenora continued on. "The garden world is not what's incredible though."

Alenna raised her brow. "What do you mean?"

"LADAR scans show what appear to be large chunks of metal debris orbiting the planet, and one extremely large construct that stretches from the planet surface all the way into space." A few gasps were heard and Lenora smiled. "I'm not sure what to make of it, but one thing is certain, it's definitely artificial."

Alenna's heart skipped a beat. This is exactly what she dreamed of. Immediately she analyzed the situation and asked the relevant questions. "Is there any radio signals or signs of life?"

Lenora shook her head. "No, nothing. The debris orbiting the planet are broken up and fractured. But they were obviously ships of some kind. Perhaps part of a space station even, given the size of the debris."

Destroyed ships. A shattered space station. A large planetary scar. A clear picture of what once occurred here was now becoming apparent. It was obvious that some kind of battle took place. And by the amount of debris, it had to be a big one. Her mind wondered on the subject. Was this a species that fought a civil war? Or was it a fight between two different species. Was this a home world or a colony of a space faring race? Did whoever once occupied this planet still exist?

"What else can you tell me about this planet?" She asked.

"Only what the preliminary scans found. The planet is small - roughly 4,000km - and very mountainous. There are no natural satellites. A third of its surface is covered in water." Lenora turned to her captain expectantly. "We have to get closer for a more detailed analysis"

Alenna let a satisfying smile cross her lips. Her objective was to open the Relay and travel back through it. But with the ice still

clearing, they would have to wait 20 to 30 hours until it was safe. She wasn't going to waste that time drifting by the Relay when ancient ruins were just waiting to be explored.

"Forbin, bring us in orbit around the planet. Korven, send a message to the Citadel about this discovery. Everyone else, you know what to do."

Instantly everyone in the CIC returned to their posts with hectic excitement. The crew's enthusiasm on what they might find was transparent.

"Do you think the debris' are Prothean?" a crew member asked.

"More likely from some unknown race" another replied.

"I hope so. Imagine what kind of technology we could find" the ships Salarian researcher said.

"I'm more interested in the culture and art of these beings."

"Dropping out of FTL near the planet in 3, 2, 1â€|"

As soon the \*\*Seloria\*\* exited FTL the ships complex sensor technology went to work. In mere seconds, detailed scans of the planet and its surroundings flooded in. What they saw stunned them.

"By the Goddess! This debris field is immense"

"They're definitely ships of some kind. Some of them are several kilometers long"

"That space station reaches down all the way to the planet surface. How is that possible?"

"Maybe it's a space elevator of some kind. I had heard of proposals for such constructions, but they were dismissed because of the immense cost."

"Bring up visuals of that piece right there" Alenna pointed to a 2.5 kilometer long chunk of metal that must have been a ship. The image of it came up on the screen and everyone gasped. It was a ship; and by the looks of it, clearly a war ship. It was as big as the Destiny Ascension itself and had what looked like massive cannons mounted in the front. The ship design was like nothing she had ever seen before; bulky yet angular, andâ€|menacing looking. The aura it gave off was clear. \_Don't mess with me.\_

Further scrutiny revealed a large, almost surgical hole pierced through the midsection of the ship. Alenna wondered what kind of weapon could have caused such a clean cut. There were many other ships similar to that one - all grey drab and boxy - with similar wounds.

"Captain, take a look at this. I don't believe it!" Lenora brought up an image of a ship of distinctly different design. Unlike the others - which were very angular - this one had smooth curves, with almost no hard-cut edges to speak of. The color was also an interest of

note; purple instead of grey, white, or blue like most ships she had seen. But those qualities, while interesting, was not what shocked the crew to its core. No, what grabbed everyone's attention was the sheer size of the ship. It was clearly broken into two pieces - with what looked like the front end of the ship being an astounding 17 kilometers, and the rear - drifting nearby - being another 10.

"L-Lenora" Alenna stammered. "Are you sure these readings are accurate. There's no way a ship could be that size!"

"Yes, I've rescanned twice already. This massive ship is broken up. I already ran the parts through the VI to determine what it would look like whole." The main screen went to a virtual simulator of the two parts slowly coming together. The front end of the ship looked like a large dome or tear drop, Alenna noted, and eventually narrowed into a thin (relatively speaking) bridge-like structure that connected to the rear end. "According to this, that ship when whole was over 27 kilometers long!"

Silence.

All across the CIC everyone quieted at Lenora's proclamation. Alenna just stared dumbfounded. Twenty-seven kilometers? "That's nine times the size of the Destiny Ascension. Goddess, that's over half the size of the Citadel itself."

"Hmm, interesting" Morlat spoke, his chin in hand deep in thought. "No signs of element zero. No, none at all. In fact, with the exception of the mass relay, there's no element zero in entire system".

Korven dismissed that claim. "That's impossible. All FTL flight utilizes element zero. It's the basis for all practical space travel."

It was true. And element zero was used not only for FTL but for virtually every advance technology in the galaxy. Whether it be weaponry, communications, shields, flight, holographic interfaces, and a host of countless other electronics and gadgets. Put simply; galactic society would not exist without it.

So why didn't these ships have it?

"There's more" Morlat continued, undeterred by Korven's dismissal. "Debris field is recent. Yes, very recent. Some ships still producing power. Small amounts but detectable. Radiation from planet scar recent too. Not natural. Planet scorched through unknown means. Hmm, hold on." Suddenly Morlat's hand flew across the holo-interface as he input complex formulas and equations that the other crew couldn't hope to understand. "Yes, base on half-life decay of radiation, planet scar occurred roughly 70 years ago."

Alenna raised her brow\_. That\_ little tidbit surprised her. This whole time she had been under the impression that they have stumble upon the ruins of an ancient species - perhaps even Prothean. But whatever happened here occurred just 70 years ago - a blink of an eye in galactic terms. "What about that large structure reaching down to the planet? What can you tell me about that?"

"The structure appears to be made up of two large arcs connected by 6 spars" Lenora began. "There are 7 'strands' that reach down to the planet surface. One of the strands is shattered a few kilometers above the planet. The length is just over 4 kilometers."

"And I presume those strands lead to somewhere?"

"One moment." Lenora said as she typed at her console. "Here, detailed optic scans of the planet surface that the strands lead to."

Images of what were clearly destroyed buildings and intricate roads were displayed on the screen. Alenna noted two things. One; this city must have once held a sizable population - and two; whatever occurred here completely devastated the region.

"Thermal signatures detect no signs of activity. The place is completely dead."

Korven twitched his mandibles in anticipation. He knew that they had just made a huge discovery - probably the biggest in centuries. What technological marvels could these beings have possessed? How could they build such immense structures? Did they manage to discover another way of practical space travel - as evidence by the lack of eezo? He finally spoke up, voicing a question that everyone was thinking. "Captain, are we going to search through the ruins?"

All eyes turned to Alenna. She scanned through the faces of her crew; eager and excitement present. She felt the same way. This is why she joined the CEC - it's why they all had. But as much as she would have loved nothing more than to rummage through the shattered ships and city ruins with her own two hands, the practical part of her mind took over. For one, her ship did not have the necessary equipment for such an operation. Her mission objective was simply to open a relay network into the Tyroggan Arm. Alien ruins was the last thing the CEC expected the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_to encounter. Furthermore these ruins were not of some long dead ancient space faring race. A massive battle took place here a mere 70 years ago; for all she knew she could have stumbled into an inter-galactic warzone.

Shoulders slumping, she sighed. "I would love nothing more than to search through these ruins, but we don't have the equipment. And whatever species it belonged to may still be around."

"So we're just going to leave as if nothing was here?" Korven said in a frustrated tone. He knew the Captain was probably right, but it didn't make it any less upsetting.

"For now" she replied. "We have already made history by opening the first Relay path into the Tyroggan Arm. Now we have made history by discovering a treasure cove of alien technology that doesn't appear to operate on element zero. That's quite an achievement for one day, hmm?" Soft chuckles were heard through the CIC. Smiling, she continued. "I promise you all, we'll be back, and we'll be at the forefront of the exploration team with the necessary equipment to properly explore these ruins." The crew seemed to take her words to heart.

"What are your orders then Captain?" Korven asked.

"We will remain here and gather as much data as possible while we wait for the ice debris from the Relay to clear. Korven, send an update to the Citadel on what we've discovered. And from now on send an update every hour on any new data we find. Once we travel back to Citadel space we can prepare for a thorough exploration."

After a slew of 'yes captains' her crew quickly went to work. Alenna inwardly grinned, and once again turned her attention to the optical screen display. She gazed upon the floating debris' and giant ships - a sea of jagged-grey and smooth-purple.

\_What great secrets do you hold? \_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: In case you were wondering, they discovered planet Harvest. And yes, I know the space elevator in cannon - Tiara - was completely destroyed. That was changed for the future arch of the story. Thanks for reading and please review.\*\*

## 2. Chapter 2: War and Peace

UNSC Colony Shanxi, 2594

Michael's senses overwhelmed him. The stench of expending rounds and high-grade explosives permeated the air. His ears ached with the loud explosions and seemingly unending weapons fire. Palms sweaty, he gripped hard on the handle of his BR55HB SR2 Battle Rifle. His heart beat rapidly; adrenaline pumping through his veins - breath coming fast and heavy.

\_Stay focused. Concentrate on your objective. \_

Crouching low, Michael moved to the edge of the half-demolished wall he was using for cover. He took a peek around the corner; his mind absorbed every detail before him - just as he was trained to do. The lessons learned at basic were ingrained in him; second nature.

\_Take in your surroundings. Observe every centimeter of the battlefield. The smallest of details will mean the difference between life and death.\_

Two Sangheili warriors - a major and a minor - as well as eight Unggoy were bunkered behind rubble, guarding the entrance to an underground bunker; the temporary headquarters of the enemy. One Unggoy, perched on top the slightly rising hill overlooking the field, manned a plasma turret. The lone grunt posed the greatest threat to his team. He must be taken out first.

Michael checked his battle sensors on his visor. His strike team - a total of twelve marines - was in position; scattered among the same rubble as he was. He activated his comm. link. "Our objective is to clear the entrance to that bunker so that the Army units can rush in and destroy their headquarters. Three, can you get a good firing position to take out that grunt on the plasma cannon?"

"Already in my sights" came the curt reply of Lilith, his sniper specialist.

"Two, Four, Five and Seven - you will be designated as Red team. I want you to advance to the enemies left as soon as that grunt falls. One, Six, Eight and I will make up Blue team. We'll flank the enemies' right. Everyone else, you are Green team. Stay here with Lilith and provide suppressive fire. Hit em' hard. Don't give them a chance to fight back."

A throng of 'affirmatives' and 'yes sirs' were confirmed on the radio. The marine's visors automatically updated the information of the commands, designating and color coding the team.

Michael had joined the marines to protect humanity, and was prepared to sacrifice his life in defense of Earth and her colonies. He took one last deep breath and readied himself. This is it.

"Lilith, now!"

On Michael's command Lilith squeezed the trigger of her SRS99C-S3 Anti-Materiel Sniper Rifle; the great boom drowning all other noise. The bullet whizzed through the air at blazing speeds, impacting the cannon-mounted grunt square in the chest. Immediately Michael and his team sprang into action. "Go, go, go!"

Green team lay down suppressive fire, quickly taking down 3 grunts in a barrage of bullets. Red and Blue team rushed forward, weapons firing as they crossed the open field as quickly as possible. The enemy tried to react, but was disorganized from the assault. With not stop fire coming in from every direction, they were pinned, hardly able to get any shots off. Michael's legged pumped hard, running full speed towards the bunker. A couple of plasma rounds hit him, causing his shields to slightly flicker. In the previous generation those shots would have certainly killed him - as Marines of the past didn't have shield technology. How they fought without it he would never know.

His team slid to a halt behind some low rubble roughly 20 meters from the entrance. Red team took cover just near the left embankment, behind a destroyed Wraith. The Marines continued to fire; grunts dropping like flies. In a matter of seconds the squad had wiped out all but two grunts and a single elite. The enemy could not even retreat due to Red team's clear line of fire to the Bunkers entrance.

Michael focused down the sights of his rifle, when suddenly his battle suits radar briefly registered a flicker of movement to his right. He stopped firing and scanned the area. Nothing.

Probably an underground rodent. His battle sensors were good, but sometimes they picked up too much, often displaying the movements of small animals on the field. Satisfied his team wasn't being flanked, he once again arose from cover to join his team. By now all but a single grunt remained from the onslaught, who cowered behind cover. Michael was about to rush forward when suddenly, he heard a sound. It was familiar to him - similar to the noise of an electrical current or shimmering shield. It was the sound of an energy blade.

The two elites de-cloaked behind Blue team and immediately slashed One and Six in the back. A shocked Eight turned to fire but was cut down as well. It was now just Michael and two elites.

In quick reaction Michael reflexively primed a frag-grenade and lobbed it towards the elites. They managed to jump away in time, but one of the elite's shields was completely drained by the explosion. Ceasing upon this, Michael fired a burst of rounds into the elite's chest - he dropped to the ground, unmoving.

The remaining elite charged towards Michael with incredible speed. He managed to just barely dive out of the way, the sword swinging inches from his body. Without delay, Michael spun around and fired 3 bursts into the elite; whose shields collapsed and body went limp.

But Michael's victory was in vain. For behind him, yet another elite de-cloaked and - before Michael could react - slashed him in the back, bellowing a mighty roar of triumph. Michael's armor locked in place, his shields drained. He knew it was over, that he had lost. Michael's limp and unmoving form fell face down, and landed on top of the elite he had just killed.

But Michael wasn't dead. No, he was very much alive. Unmoving, but alive. And so too was the elite he fell on, who stared back at him - face a mere inches from his. Both alive; both unable to move.

"Well" Michael said, slight amusement in his voice, "this is a little awkward."

The elite looked at him in annoyance. "You got lucky with that grenade; it drained most of my shields. Had I been at full strength I would have pummeled you to the ground."

"Suuurre you would. Oh, and stabbing us in the back? Really? That's low."

"It was a sound military strategy" the elite retorted.

"The only thing it 'sounds' like is cowardice."

The elite was about to respond when suddenly a loud siren pierced the air. A slightly synthesized feminine voice spoke over the loud speakers. "Live battle training is over. Please report back to the main facility for the debriefing."

Michael's body armor unlocked, and he, along with everyone else who 'died', could now move. He stood up, offering the Sangheili - Relo 'Lemai - a hand. "Come on, I'm sure Sergeant Roland is anxious as hell to chew our asses off every little mistake, best not to keep him waiting."

All across the field Humans, Sangheili, and Unggoy picked themselves up - many laughing and trading jibes about how exceedingly badass they were on the battlefield. The Unggoy who was shot by Lilith's sniper rifle had to get three fellow comrades to help him up. Although the training weapons and ammunitions weren't lethal, they still hurt like hell. Being shot by a gun bigger than him - real or not - is something Michael hoped he would never experience.

"Everyone is improving greatly" Relo said as he and Michael headed for the main facility with the others.

"Yeah, maybe" Michael replied sheepishly.

"Is something wrong?"

"What? No. Wellâ€¦ It's just that, we've been doing these training exercises non-stop for nearly a year. You and I both know we should be out fighting Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar pirates on the border colonies, not wasting time playing games."

Relo slightly chuckled. "You are eager to prove your worth Michael, but you should remain patient. In time you will have your glory."

"In time? We're stationed at Shanxi, Relo. This is the furthest colony away from Jiralhanae space. Do you really think we're ever going to see action?"

"Shanxi is the second, and largest, joint species colony - It is a symbol of what our people can accomplish together. You are a protector of that symbol; you guard the lives of over 2 million of our people. It is a great honor to serve them."

Michael sighed. He knew Relo was right. His posting was important - in many ways more important than those protecting the borders. The UNSC/United Republic of Species joint command defense force was a symbol of unity - a way to heal the wounds of resentment from the Great War. Although 41 years have passed, and both sides were in the process of recovery, lingering animosity still remained.

"You know what would really bring our races closer together? Wiping out any brute stupid enough to enter our territory." Michael replied.

"These joint colonies are just as important too. The Great War may be over but the resentment is not."

It was true. Although technically allies, there wasn't a whole lot of love between the UNSC and URS. Of course, these feelings have become slightly abated with humanity and the newly formed URS (made up of the Sangheili, Unggoy, and Mgalekgolo) forming a military alliance to protect themselves against the warring Jiralhanae clans and Kig-Yar pirates. For the first decade the alliance was viewed by many to be meaningless - mostly symbolical; that was until a major Sangheili colony world - Xialos - was attacked by the Jiralhanae. The planet, boasting a population of over 300 million, would have certainly been glassed had it not been for the timely arrival of UNSC's 5th fleet - who, with the help of the Sangheili, expelled the Jiralhanae out of the system. It was the first time either side helped the other with no gain for themselves, and it greatly commanded the respect of the Sangheili people.

It was also when Relo 'Lemai came to greatly respect humanity. Relo was just 15 at the time of the attack, born and raised on Xialos. If it weren't for humanity, he, his family, and his home would have been vaporized. He witnessed a race that his kind once tried to wipe out come to their aid. It was then that he decided that once he joined the military, he would apply for the UNSC/URS joint species command - a small branch that dealt with securing the border territory of both species.

Of course, another aspect that brought the two powers closer was the

opening of trade and sharing of technology. Both sides benefitted greatly, with humanity getting access to shield, plasma, and practical energy weaponry; while the URS could now develop vastly superiors AI's. Still, twenty-seven years of bloodshed and war of attrition didn't simply go away. And although the younger generations were more open, the older on both sides still held mistrust and even outright hostility towards each other.

Shanxi was to be the shining example of the new era. Although not technically the first jointly held world - the military posting of Kelloko near the Jiralhanae border took that distinction - Shanxi was the first attempt at mass colonization and development. And it had succeeded beyond what anyone could have hoped for. Although chosen for the planets agricultural prospect, Shanxi quickly became a cultural hub and center of trade for the UNSC/URS Alliance. And in just a decade the colony had developed into an economical powerhouse.

"You know" Michael began as they neared the training facility, "I was just thin -

"Attention!"

Suddenly the whole group snapped to attention; Sergeant Roland storming to them, looking more pissed than an enraged Mgalekgolo. "That was sloppy! Unacceptable losses. Unacceptable tactics.

\_Great. Here we go\_

"It's clear you all need more extensive training. So I'm cancelling next week's leave." Everyone grimaced, but tried not to show it. Sergeant Roland mischievously grinned. "Now we have the whole week to train like one big happy family."

Michael inwardly sighed. \_Better cancel that date.\_

\* \* \*

><p>UNSCURS 3rd Garrison Training Facility Headquarters

An elderly man stood by the window, dressed in his Navy uniform, overlooking the rolling fields of Shanxi's crops. He had a large scar running down the right side of his face. The skin over his lower jaw was slightly disfigured - obvious signs of a plasma wound. He stood rigid - although not an imposing figure, he non-the-less commanded enormous respect.

A much younger officer behind him spoke. "Are you sure? I don't doubt his abilities, but he's still young. He hasn't even had any real combat experience yet."

"We all have to start somewhere." Came the rusty reply of the old man.

"Yes, but you want him to 'start' on a project that could have profound consequences for both the UNSC and URS. And there's the fact that he's headstrong; too willing to blindly rush into battle without thinking things through."

The elderly man chuckled, then turned to face the young officer. "He

passed the war games with flying colors. And besides, he reminds me of myself when I was younger."

"Well, he is eager to prove himself, and his command abilities are impressive. Okay, If you're sure about this Buck."

"I am."

The young officer nodded. "Commander Michael Shepard it is then. I'll let R'Loss Ravelumee know."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN Thanks to all of the reviews. This is my first story and your feedback will help craft me into a better writer.\*\*

\*\*Now to address a few issues about the last chapter.\*\* \*\*There is some confusion about the size of the Destiny Ascension. As it turns out, the size of the Destiny Ascension is never given. The only clue we get is in Mass Effect Revelations when David Anderson notes that it's 'four times the size of the largest human ships'. And since Alliance Dreadnaughts are typically 800 meters to 1 kilometer in length, I figured the Ascension is roughly 3 to 3.5 kilometers.\*\*

\*\*The UNSC Carrier is not the Spirit of Fire.\*\*

\*\*InhumanEnglishman: You are right. In hindsight I regret putting both the Space elevator and Super Carrier in the same chapter. I think it split the focus between two engineering marvels - and as you said, made the chapter seem a bit rushed.\*\*

\*\*Thanks to everyone for the story alerts. And let me know how I can improve.

><strong>

### 3. Chapter 3: Team Building

Council Tower, Citadel - Serpent Nebula

The small yet elaborately decorated conference room was a favorite place for the councilors to discuss sensitive matters without worrying about the prying eyes of the public. The Council Chambers was a good place for giving the impression that the Citadel was open to the public and had nothing to hide. However, when it came to discussing classified intelligence and matters of citadel security, they came here; in the small, espionage proof room. And the discovery of advance alien technology - technology that was used for war - certainly fit that description.

The three Councilors sat around the large granite table, sifting through the reports on their data pad. Matriarch Layna, the head of the Citadel Exploratory Committee, along with the Turian General Septimus Oraka, was also present. Layna had just finished giving the councilors the debriefing. "This is perhaps the greatest discovery we have made in centuries, perhaps even millennia."

The Turian councilor, Valern, who had until now been silent, spoke. "It could also be the greatest threat to the council in

millennia."

Layna was slightly taken aback by the councilor's blunt remark.  
"Sorry?"

"Look at these ships Matriarch. It is obvious they were used for war, and the number and size of these ships suggest a rather large war; a very recent, perhaps ongoing large war."

Councilor Tevos frowned. It had been 35 years since the ban on activating dormant Relays was lifted. It was decided that, despite the possible dangers - like encountering another race like the Rachni - whatever was out there the council would have to deal with eventually. Better today than tomorrow they reasoned. And after nearly 2,000 years since the Rachni wars, the stigma about the dangers of the unknown had slowly bled away from public fears. Plus, citadel space was getting crowded. Garden worlds were rare after all, and although it may seem like the council spread through half of the galaxy, the fact is less than 1% - Terminus systems included - had been mapped and explored by the council. This was due to the nature of the Relays themselves. Two colonies could be thousands of light-year apart; but with connecting relays in the system, travel time was virtually instantaneous. One could actually travel a quarter across the galaxy quicker than traveling to the adjacent system through traditional FTL flight. This made council space spread far and thin, and most of the discovered garden worlds - almost all near Relays - have been colonized or claimed by one group or another. So the policy ban was uplifted - although still highly regulated of course - and the council started to colonize newly opened systems. Councilor Tevos now started to wonder if this was not a wise decision. "Perhaps it was a mistake changing Citadel policy concerning opening new Relays." Her voice was ethereal; calm - a trait common among her species. "The possibility of another Rachni-type war does not fill me with hope."

Councilor Milos - the Salarian councilor - had different take on the issue. "I rather look at this as an opportunity." His two counterparts' full attention now on him, he continued. "The technology of these ruins is quite unique. An advanced society that developed without the use of eezo. If we can learn how their technology works, how they traveled through space without the mass effect, it could be a great boon to the Council."

Councilor Valern considered the Salarian's words. "Yes. Powerful ships suggest powerful weapons. The council must be one step ahead of its enemies. I think it prudent we send research teams to reverse-engineer the technology and weapon systems. We must learn their capabilities, so that if hostile contact occurs, we will be prepared." The councilor once again glanced at his datapad - the image of the insanely large ship drifting like a slumbering giant. "I also suggest we bring Hierarchy patrol groups in the system to secure the ruins against any potential pirates, scavengers, or more importantly, the beings that created these ships."

"I'm not sure inserting patrol fleets is a good idea. If whatever creatures created these ruins find warships in their territory, it might cause a conflict - maybe even war" Tevos said calmly, yet with a hint of worry in her voice.

"Or," Valern countered "they'll open fire on our research teams as

soon as they come in contact anyway. Look at these massive ships Tevos. A twenty-seven kilometer dreadnaught, dedicated solely to warfare. It is obvious these creatures must be by nature war-like and aggressive like the Krogan."

"That's assuming they are even still around. It's quite possible they have destroyed themselves." Milos remarked.

"And it's possible they have not." Valern responded. "I rather not leave that to chance. The council must assert its authority to all who threaten it. If these beings are still around, and they attack us, we will show them the true might of the Council."

General Oraka stepped forward. "I can pull patrols out of the Traverse to secure the system. And the Hierarchy can spare one of its dreadnaughts, just in case we come into hostile contact."

"And besides" Valern said, "even if they prove to be hostile to us, they don't even use element zero. How advanced can they be?"

"I hope it doesn't come to that." Councilor Tevos replied. "Still, I believe it is necessary to learn all we can about the technology of these ruins." The other two councilors nodded in agreement. "Then it is decided, we'll launch a research project to learn about and reverse-engineer this technology. Matriarch Layna, I want the CEC to head this project."

"Of course Councilor. We have already begun planning the stages of an in-depth exploration" Layna said, trying to hide her excitement.

"And the Hierarchy will secure the region" Valern added.

Very well. This meeting is adjourned.

\* \* \*

><p>Liara T'Soni wiped the buildup of sweat off her forehead. The air was thick in the vast jungles of Gei Hinnom; the red sun shone brightly in the cloudless sky. Her clothes - a white overcoat with form-fitting black pants - clung to her damp skin. Mentally berating herself for not dressing with appropriate attire, she resumed her work. The tombstone she was excavating - a 50,000 year old Prothean burial ground - had been painstaking work. She gently brushed the crusted dirt of the ancient rock carvings, careful not to damage the relic made delicate with time.</p>

For the past week she and her excavation team had camped out on the outer edge of one of the varying mining zones. These mining camps - much to Liara's detriment - have sprung up across the planet of Gei Hinnom in the past 7 years. This world was once a Prothean colony; and one of the more preserved ones at that. Vast dedicated burial grounds - some of which burrowed deep beneath the surface - were found shortly after the planets discovery. Unfortunately, so too were large concentrations of element zero. Mining companies - most notably Eldeff-Ashland Corporation - successfully lobbied to scout the planet for eezo. And what occurred next was in Liara's mind nothing short of archeological genocide. Mining teams began looting gravesites for eezo and whatever ancient treasures they could find. All across the planet burial grounds and ruins were rummaged through, taken apart,

and even outright destroyed for quick profit. Ancient relics that should have been displayed and appreciated in museums were sold to the highest bidder on the black market. The 'cemetery business' as it was called got so bad the by the time the EAM brought the looting to a stop, much of the once valuable ruins were left barren.

The dig site her team focused on was one of the few untouched ruins left on the planet. She was content to study, but not disturb, this tomb before it was too late. Even with the new restrictions on the mining companies, it was only a matter of time before this place was looted as well. Banishing such thoughts, less she become enraged, Liara opened her canister and poured water over the tombstone. The crusted dirt and mud flowed off the rock, and soon the intricate carvings of a Prothean language appeared. Using her Omni-tool, she took pictures of the carvings for later examination and study. Much of the Prothean languages have yet to be fully understood. However, basic words and meaning could still be translated; and Liara had studied Prothean languages well. Most of it was gibberish to her, but one word stood out.

"Rejoice" Liara read to herself. She pondered the word and its meaning on the tombstone. Perhaps the Protheans believed death to be an entrance to the afterlife, and was cause for celebration. Or maybe they choose to remember the dead by cherishing their accomplishments. It could also mean -

"Liara, up here."

Liara looked up from the 6 meter hole she was dug in. One of her team members, a fellow Asari named Erissa, stood at the edge of the gap. "What is it?" she asked.

"A call just came in for you from CEC. They want you to come to the Citadel. They say it's urgent."

"But I'm in the middle of an excavation. I can't just leave!"

"I'm sorry. I tried to ask what it was about but they said it was classified."

Liara sighed. "Very well, tell them that as soon as we're done excavating the site I'll head straight for the Citadel."

Erissa gave an apologetic look, knowing Liara wouldn't like what came next. "Actually, they want you to stop what you're doing and go there immediately."

"What! They're the ones who funded this operation. Why would they pull me out now?"

"Like I said, they wouldn't say. But they told me Alenna T'Velos wanted to see you personally."

Liara raised her brow. She knew Alenna by reputation. She was one of CEC's most respected explorers, and had made dozens of archeological finds across the galaxy. Liara read many of her scientific reports and viewed her as a role-model to emulate. In truth, she admired the woman greatly. What could she possibly want with her?

Liara sighed heavily before nodding. "Okay, send the CEC a message.

Tell them I'm on my way."

"Of course" Erissa replied, and then turned and left.

Liara stood up, looking one last time at the tombstone. It was round, almost egg-shaped. Simple yet elegant, much like all Prothean architecture. Reluctantly, she pulled herself out of the hole, wondering what the CEC could possibly deem so urgent.

\* \* \*

><p>"Come on you Bosh'tet!"<p>

Tali swore under her visor as she slammed her fist on the engine core. Repairing outdated cargo vessels on the Citadel docks was \_not\_ what she planned on doing during her pilgrimage. After all, she did plenty of that on the Flotilla. But she was broke and needed a job. And the only occupation a Quarian could get hired on the Citadel for was in engineering. That meant she did what others didn't want to do - mainly repairing crappy ships.

What really irked her was that she could do so much more. Tali was a technological prodigy - even by her own people's standards. She had scored extremely high on the employment test too. Yet her boss, a Volus merchant who owned several repair shops, made her a grunt worker. And worse, her superiors seemed no more capable at understanding ships than a Vorcha understanding quantum physics. Often times she would suggest simple things such as reprogramming a ship's power transfer unit or re-calibrate the FBA couplings - repairs that would greatly increase the efficiency with little to no extra work. Yet her inputs would either be ignored or rejected. Tali finally gave up on the utter lack of efficiency that aliens seemed to care little about. She just did her job so she could save enough credits to get off the citadel and continue her pilgrimage.

That meant getting this stubborn engine core functioning once again. The engine was so incredibly neglected and unmaintained it was a miracle the Batarian owner could drift the thing to the citadel. Tali was good, but she wasn't a miracle worker.

"Hey Quarian" a Turian called out.

Tali turned towards him; it was one of her supervisors. "I have a name" she squint her eyes. "Its Tali'Zorah nar Ra-"

"Yeah whatever. Someone wants to see you. She's waiting outside the docks."

Tali gritted her canine teeth in frustration, but tried hard not to show it. She simply nodded and headed for the gate. On her way she wondered who would want to see her. She didn't know anyone outside of work, and her relationship with her coworkers was one of indifference. When she arrived at the gate she looked around, and then saw a lone Asari approaching her.

"Tali'Zorah nar Rayya?" she inquired.

Tali nodded. "That's me."

She bowed slightly, an Asari form of greeting. Tali was slightly

startled by the respectful gesture. It was something she hadn't seen displayed to her by aliens. The Asari spoke. "My name is Lenora. I work for the Citadel Exploration Committee. We've recently come across a situation and we could use your expertise".

"My expertise?" Tali said suspiciously

"Yes. We need a tech engineer who can learn and decipher how unknown system work. We've seen your engineering employment scores. They're impressive. If you're as half as good as the scores suggest then you'll be a valuable addition to our exploratory team."

Decipher unknown systems? Exploratory team? Tali was confused. "You want to hire me? For what?"

Lenora smiled. "Yes. We would like to put you on our team. You will be our tech and engineer specialist onboard the exploratory vessel \_\*\*Seloria \*\*\_under the command of Captain Alenna T'Velos. She insisted you join us."

"Me?"

"Well, not you specifically. Just a 'really good Quarantine tech'. Captain Alenna has traveled across the galaxy and she knows from experience you Quarantines are the best at working with unfamiliar tech systems."

Tali didn't say anything, but just stared at Lenora with a quizzical expression.

Lenora continued. "For what exactlyâ€|well I can't tell you that. Not yet."

"Why not?"

"It's been deemed classified by the Council. Suffice to say we found something that we can't quite make sense of. That's all I can say for now."

Tali was surprised. She honestly didn't know what to say. A million questions ran through her head. What do they want me to do? What did they find that was important enough to classify by the council? What kind of 'unfamiliar systems' was she talking about?

"Um, I already have a job here" she stated.

Lenora chuckled. "What, working for minimum wage as a grunt worker? Please. We both know you're better than that." She handed Tali a data pad. "Here, your employment for CEC has already been filled out. You'll be making forty credits an hour and have full benefits."

Tali's eyes widened in shock. \_Forty credits an hour? I'll be making more in one day than I do in a week. \_After staring blankly at the data pad for some time, Tali finally got a hold of herself. "What exactly would I be working with? What is this 'unfamiliar tech' you speak about?"

"As I said before, I can't tell you that yet." Lenora stepped closer, giving Tali a sincere look. "I can promise you this; you'll see

things you never dreamed of - incredible things. Trust me, you will \_not \_be disappointed."

Tali tried to analyze everything she was just told. Could this really be happening? Did Keelah finally answer her prayers? Could she now continue her pilgrimage? Is she really going to keep working for that stupid Volus?

"So what do you say?" Lenora asked.

A sly smile crossed Tali's lips. "Lead the way."

She didn't even give her boss notice.

\* \* \*

><p>The conference room Mordin Solus stood in was abuzz with rumors and speculation about the emergency session. Top scientists, archeologists, technology specialists, and even philosophers were gathered in the large atrium at CEC headquarters. Most in the room - just over a hundred by Mordin's count - didn't know what the meeting was about. Mordin did.</p>

"Everyone, may you please be seated. We are about to begin the session."

The murmurs died down as people moved to take their seats. Mordin's seat, along with the rest of Alenna's newly assembled team, was in the first row. When he had been contacted by Alenna's people he had initially refused. He was scientist, not an explorer. And although the relics of the past fascinated him - most things did in fact - he didn't want to spend his last days searching through old ruins, as the CEC was known for. It wasn't until he learned more details of the discovery - thanks to his contacts in the STG - that he changed his mind. Shattered star ships of immense size; gargantuan constructs; technology not based off eezo - studying such things is something he \_would\_ like to spend his waning days doing. And this project would be a lot lessâ€|morally ambiguous than his last.

Mordin reached the front row with the rest of the exploratory team. He recognized Captain Alenna and Lenora, though the rest were new to him. They were a mix of many races in the galaxy - Asari, Turian, Salarian, even a Quarian. Alenna walked up to Mordin and bowed her head.

"Professor Solus, it is good to see you. I'm glad you decided to join the team."

"Yes, I am most excited. Have heard rumors. Amazing discovery. New technology. Scientific research just waiting to be explored."

"The findings were classified. How much do you know?"

"Enough to know this will be a worthy endeavor for any scientist. I look forward to our research together."

"I am glad to hear that." She gestured to the opened seats. "Shall we?"

Mordin smiled and took his seat. Once everyone was seated a

glamorously dressed Asari stepped up to the podium. As the whispers died down she began to speak.

"Welcome to the Citadel Exploratory Committee. I am Matriarch Layna, head of CEC. Thank you all for coming here on such short notice. I imagine everyone is quite curious about why you were summoned."

A large screen behind the Matriarch lit up; on it displayed the entire galaxy; a large swath was highlighted in red. "This section here is known as the Tyroggan Arm; it takes up roughly 15% of the galaxy. As you are undoubtedly aware, the Tyroggan Arm has long been out of our reach; until now." The image of the galaxy changed to that of a dormant Relay. "This is Relay 314. It was discovered by a Volus mining company near the edge of council space. What makes this Relay special is that its connecting Relay is a Prime Relay located on the outer edge of the Tyroggan Arm." Soft murmurs were whispered throughout the room.

She continued; "An exploratory team lead by Captain Alenna was tasked with opening the connecting Relay. After seven weeks of FTL travel to the unknown system, the Relay was discovered and opened." Matriarch Layna scanned the crowd, their inquisitive gaze cast upon her. "However, in that same system something else was discovered-something quite amazing."

The screen changed to the large debris' drifting aimlessly through space. "Orbiting the star systems second planet, which we have designated Tyrogg-1, are debris fields of unknown alien technology that operates fundamentally differently than our own." Audible gasps were heard throughout the room as the crowd took in the sights of the broken ships and large structures. "The planet is a garden world, although it underwent significant ecological destruction by some unknown means roughly seventy years ago. There are shattered ruins dotted throughout the planet, and one large destroyed city which once boasted a significant population. There have been no signs of intelligent life, nor contact with the beings that once resided here. It is important to note that the devastation was not natural." More murmurs were heard. "As evidence by the destruction of the ships and the space station, we concluded that a great battle took place here between two different factions." The tension in the air was one of shock. Mordin was much less so, having already seen the reports himself.

A Salarian to Mordin's far right rose. "Matriarch, you say two different factions fought - how can you be certain?"

"Because we've discovered two distinctly different ship designs and weaponry" the Matriarch answered. Layna pushed a button on her Omni-tool, causing the screen to display the various angular ships. "These ships, bulky and angular in design, are the most numerous. We believe that the species of these ships were the ones that colonized this world due to the similarity of the space station design and material. As you can see, the ships are quite large, and have incredibly thick armor plating. The material is made of some form of molecular titanium, although much stronger than anything we have. Layna pushed another button and the 2.5 kilometer ship Alenna's team first observed was displayed. "This ship appears to be the largest of its kind - designated as U-2. At two and a half kilometers long, it's comparably the same size as the Destiny Ascension."

Many in the room went wide eyed. The Destiny Ascension was the single most powerful ship in Council space. No other ship even came close to matching its size and power. Layna continued, knowing what came next would really shock them. "But as large as these ships are, they are nothing compared to the other kind." The room went deadly silent as all eyes locked upon the Matriarch with anticipation. The screen suddenly displayed the massive purple ships, bulbous in design.

"These ships are simply massive. As you can see, they are very smooth and curved; distinctly different from the geometrically angular designs of the others. Most of the ships are anywhere between 300 meters to over 5 kilometers. But the real behemoth, this one" she pointed, "was a staggering 27 kilometers long before being severed into two pieces. This ship - which we have designated as U-1 - is the largest ship ever recorded."

The silence of the room was breached by gasps; murmurs of disbelief - as if no one could accept what they had just heard. Mordin couldn't blame them for their reaction; he had a similar one when he read the STG reports.

An Asari near the back rose. "Matriarch, twenty-seven kilometers? How is that even possible?"

"That's what we hope to find out. There is also something peculiar about these ships. They don't seem to run on element zero. In fact there is no trace of element zero at all."

"But Matriarch," another Salarian interjected, "all FTL flight utilizes eezo. Are you telling us these beings travel by different means?"

"As strange as it sounds, yes. This planet is not a homeworld, therefore the species who colonized it must have found another way of practical space flight."

"What about the Relay? Did these creatures not use it?" a Turian asked.

"The Tyrogg Relay was incased in the ice moon around the systems 5th planet. It is likely the species did not know it existed. Had our exploratory team not had the coordinates, they would not have found it either."

"Now," the Matriarch continued, "as you can guess, the council is very interested in the technology of these ruins. That is why you are here. We are launching a full exploration into the system - called Project Discovery - to learn and reverse engineer these technologies. You will be divided into teams, each with their own area of expertise. Captain Alenna and her team will be at the forefront of the project."

Matriarch Layna looked over the crowd. Eagerness, excitement, and above all else - curiosity - was present in the room. Layna gave a warm smile. "You were all chosen for a reason. You are the best of your fields, and I have no doubt you will accomplish your objectives. Now, let's make history."

Everyone in the room rose at once and clapped. This was, without doubt, going to be the most important endeavor of their lives. They were going to learn who these creatures were and what they were

capable of.

...But they would also learn that one should not go poking through that which one does not understand.

\*\*A/N: Thanks again for all of your awesome reviews. I have taken in consideration all of the critiques and criticism, and hopefully it will help me improve.\*\*

\*\* - Thanks for the tips - especially about showing the relationship between the UNSC and URS (which stands for United Republic of Species). In future chapters I will try to explain it in a way that the reader can 'experience it' instead of just being told.\*\*

\*\*Robo Reader 21 - Sheesh, how did I miss that! Thanks for the heads-ups. I'll definitely change it.\*\*

\*\*Thanks to all and let me know how I can improve.  
><strong>

#### 4. Chapter 4: New Relations

"All systems check green. UNSC Corvette \*\*\_Hades Gate\_\*\* fully operational and ready for departure. Waiting for permission from Control" the young voice of Kyle Doran, the ship's Navigation Officer stated matter-of-factly.

The ship's captain, John Miles, nodded, and then took a sip of his third - no fourth - cup of cold, disgusting mud-water the UNSC dare calls 'coffee'. "Athena, bring up the mission reports to my Neural Interface."

"Of course Captain" Athena, a 4th generation 'smart' AI, said in her soothing British accent.

Immediately the mission file was downloaded into his brain and projected into his retinas. Although having already been thoroughly debriefed from the ONI Spooks, he still liked to read through the mission reports himself. Going over every minute detail - no matter how small or seemingly insignificant - could end up saving lives. Miles was anything but brash, choosing always to analyze every situation thoroughly before acting. It was why the Office of Naval Intelligence recruited him.

Not that he expected anything to go wrong on this routine recon mission to Harvest. Every two months he was assigned to travel to the infamous planet, gather the terra-forming data, and perhaps blast anyone stupid enough to go poking through the ruins of battle's past. That was unlikely; ONI would know immediately if any objects in slip-space were heading to Harvest; and even if scavengers somehow made it past the slip-space sensors undetected - they would never find anything of real value. The weapons systems, computer tech, slip-space drives, and especially navigational data were stripped long ago. Although the Cole Protocol seemed almost pointless now - as every alien faction now knew where Earth was located - it was still enacted by High Command.

Still, that didn't stop some from trying. Plenty of scavengers and pirates had attempted to steal some of the wreckage and sell it to

the highest bidder after the war ended. The historical significance made any item from Harvest highly prized after all. The thought of these low-lives defiling the hallowed space of Harvest sickened Miles, and he was glad that the UNSC made the zone a restricted area. After it was apparent that any unauthorized ship making a jump to Harvest would be destroyed, the looting had stopped.

Taking another sip of his cold coffee, Miles 'thought' up the debriefings of the missions from previous years. He sifted through the data displayed on his retinas. The terra-forming of Harvest was going better than planned. Originally the UNSC had projected it could take up to over 150 - 200 years to complete. As it turns out, terra-forming worlds that were glassed is \_a lot \_harder than normal planets due to the insane amount of radiation it caused. The planet had already been seeded with plant and flora life not too long after the war; and the once nearly blackened world had slowly began to turn green once again. After just four decades the air was now comfortably breathable, and the planet's natural weather cycles began to stabilize. However, the radiation from the glassing was incredibly high. If left alone, ONI projected it would take about 150,000 years before the planet was safe for human colonization again.

Fortunately the UNSC's top scientists came up with a way to neutralize the radiation. Mile's wasn't sure how it was done exactly - something about engineered molecules that absorbed the radiation particles - but he did know it was working beyond what even the most optimistic could had hoped for. In truth, the planet would, in theory, be habitable in less than three decades - a full century sooner than originally thought.

Athena materialized in the Holo-Projector next to the Captain's chair. "Permission granted. We have authorization to depart."

"Alright. Activate the trans-light engines. Doran, plot a course for Harvest."

"Aye-aye Captain. Course plotted. Estimate time of arrival is one week and 4 days."

"Understood." Mile's sat down on the command chair and stared out into the void. In front of the ship the familiar blue portal of slipstream space appeared, and the ship was quickly engulfed into utter blackness. Saying that the new UNSC trans-light engines were far faster than previous generations was an understatement. During the Great War era, Shaw-Fujikawa engines could at best travel a measly two to three light years per day. A 'short' jump would take up to two months, while long jumps could take up to half a year or longer. But now thanks to reversed engineered Forerunner technology, the trip to the remote world - a journey that in previous generations would have taken eight months - could now be reached in weeks.

Miles loved travelling to Harvest - if nothing more than to appreciate the significance of the planet. It was the first world to fall to the Covenant; the first to be glassed. It was where the greatest struggle in human history began. He loved drifting his ship through the ruins of one of the most famous battles in history. Passing by the awesome ships that most would only read about in history books; seeing that gargantuan Super Carrier with your own eyes - the thought of it always sent shivers down Miles' back. The

experience of it all; the knowledge that you were entering sacred space and hallowed grounds - there was simply nothing to compare it to.

However, for some unknown reason, the familiar feelings of delight and excitement weren't present. A strange sense of foreboding grasped him - as if uncertainty and danger lay before him. Miles shook it off. He was tired, and the 'coffee' only succeeded in making him feel queasy in the pit of his stomach. The fact was, historical significance aside, this was just another routine recon mission. He need not worry himself.

\* \* \*

><p>UNSCURS 3rd Garrison Training Facility Headquarters

Two short, curt knocks interrupted the General's thoughts as he read through the file of Commander Michael J. Shepard.

"Enter."

Michael proceeded in the office and stopped precisely three feet in front of the desk. If he was surprised to see a Sangheili standing behind the General, he didn't show it. He offered a crisp salute.  
"Reporting as ordered, Sir."

"At ease, Lieutenant."

Michael placed his hands in the small of his back, executing a picture perfect parade rest form. General Edward Buck took a moment to observe the young man. He was tall - 6'3 - and thoroughly built; muscular yet at the same time lean. His short cut blond hair and blue eyes gave hint to his German ancestry, while his darkened Caucasian skin tone betrayed his mixed ethnic diversity. Buck was always good at reading people, and the aura the young lieutenant gave off was one of easy confidence - a natural leader. Buck could see that even if he hadn't seen him in action. When he first learned about the man's natural skills in combat, he wondered why High Command didn't put him on the border front leading men against Jiralhanae and Kig-Yar pirates, but instead stationed him in the most remote colony in UNSC space. It wasn't until he read the man's file that he understood. Everyone who lived on Shanxi had to go through extensive background checks about their willingness to live and work with aliens. The last thing the UNSC and URS wanted was a major cross-species incident on a planet meant to symbolize unity. These background checks extended to the men and women on the colony's joint defense force as well. And the fact was, not a whole lot of humans liked the idea of taking orders from a Sangheili, to put it mildly. In truth, the most optimistic one could say about Human/Sangheili relations was that it was not (openly) hostile. However, given Michael's past it was obvious why he was more willing to trust the Sangheili than most.

"Lieutenant", the General began, "Do you know why you're here?"

Michael seemed to deeply consider, yet after a few seconds he answered truthfully. "No Sir, I don't."

"How loyal are you to humanity?" the General asked.

"Sir?" Michael seemed surprised by the General's odd question.

"How far are you willing to go to keep humanity safe?"

"I'll do whatever it takes to protect UNSC space." Michael replied, without a hint of doubt.

"Whatever it takes?"

"Yes Sir."

"Even if that means leaving the UNSC?"

Michael eye's slightly widened at the General's assertion. Buck wasn't surprised by Michael's less than hidden shock at his words. He had studied the man's history extensively - the UNSC was everything to him.

"Sir, I don't understand" Michael finally replied.

The Sangheili - who until now had remained silent, stepped forward. "I think it time we tell him."

The General nodded, and then pulled out a large folder and dropped it on his desk. Large, bold letters marked the front.

'\*\*ABOVE TOP SECRET: THE N7 PROJECT'\*\*

General Buck began. "The UNSC likes to tell the people that the Jiralhanae don't threaten us; that they're more content to destroy themselves in their own region of space." He gave Michael a firm look. "But you and I know better."

The mention of the Jiralhanae caused Michael to tense - almost imperceptible, but the anger, resentment, and hatred was definitely present. He did know the threat the Brutes posed - He knew it better than anyone. Twenty-three years did nothing to lessen the pain. "Yes Sir. The Brutes can't be ignored forever. We have to do more than just stay on the defensive."

"You're quite right." Buck replied. He gestured to the folder on his desk. "That's why the UNSC and URS are forming a new military division. The N7 program will be composed of the best of our respective species. Unlike other joint military operations - which are simply UNSC and URS teams coordinating with each other - this will be the first truly multi-race combat division. Race won't matter; every candidate is chosen purely by merit. You will be in charge of some aliens, and some aliens will be in charge of you. All will work together with a common goal - to dismantle, disrupt, and destroy any and all threats posed to the UNSC and URS."

Michael took in everything he was told. "Sir, you want me to be a part of this project?"

This time it was the Sangheili who spoke. "I am R'Loss Ravelum, the overseer of this project. I have observed you in action. Your combat skills are exceptional Commander, and your command abilities are equally impressive. You have that fire - that flare in you that makes others willing to follow you into the depths of the abyss." Michael

didn't quite know what to say about the compliment. The Sangheili continued, "And your history makes you more than willing to work with my kind. It's why you choose to apply for the Joint Species Command Force is it not?"

A few moments of awkward silence past before Michael responded. "Yes, it is. Although when I joined I had hoped to be deployed on the border front so I could make a difference. Honestly, I don't feel like I'm doing any good being stationed here."

"Well, now you do have a chance to make a difference" Buck said. "This program will run by the motto of 'the best defense is a good offense'. N7 teams won't be defending the border colonies - that's what the joint defense force is for. You will instead go on the offensive; penetrating deep behind enemy lines - striking them where it truly hurts. You will take the fight to them."

Michael understood. Better to fight on enemy territory than on one's own. For decades the UNSC had dealt with these skirmishes on a purely defensive matter. And while that kept any Kig-Yar pirates or Brute clans refined to the border - it also meant that virtually every engagement took place in UNSC and URS space. Striking the enemy before they strike you was a policy that Michael could only approve of. And from what he was told, this N7 program was like a dream come true. However, there was something that still bothered him.

"I understand the wisdom in that, Sir. It's about time we became proactive instead of reactive." Michael said. "But I have to ask, what did you mean about leaving the UNSC?"

"While the N7 program will be jointly operated, you will no longer be considered part of the UNSC military. Officially, this program will remain off the books. High Command doesn't want this project to be hampered with red-tape and regulations. What you do and how you do it - even your own identity - will be classified above top secret."

Ravelum spoke. "You and your comrades will be the silent guardians of our people. Although unknown, you will have more of an impact than an entire fleet."

Michael pondered the Sangheili's words and what it meant for him. He thought of the single event that would forever define his life and the choices he would make; the moment that would haunt his dreams even to this day. He remembered the fear, the sheer terror that gripped him; the feeling of utter hopelessness. He remembered the blood - so much blood; of his neighbors, of his friends, of hisâ€|it was too painful to think about. He couldn't do anything; so young, so powerless. He could only hide - hide a pray the savages wouldn't find and slaughter him like they did everyone else.

But he was no longer that scared, defenseless 8 year old boy who cowered in hiding. He was a powerful warrior who could fight back.

Buck then spoke, bringing Michael out his thoughts. "Anymore questions you want to ask?"

Only one crossed his mind.

"How soon can we begin?"

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Sorry about the long wait. It's been a busy couple of days. Hopefully I can manage to update other chapters quicker.\*\*

\*\*Honestly, I don't feel this chapter was up to standard, but after writing it - then modifying it - then scraping all together - then re-writing and modifying again; well, I just wanted to get it over with. \*\*

\*\*Thanks for all of your reviews and suggestions. I promise the next chapters will be a lot more exiting.

><strong>

## 5. Chapter 5: Arrival

En route to Tyrogg System

Onboard the Citadel Exploratory Vessel \_\*\*Seloria \*\*\_

Tali'Zorah couldn't take her eyes off the massive ships displayed on her Omni-tool. After the CEC debriefing she was given full access to the findings, which she had studied vigorously the past few days. What engineering marvels these beings created. As a Quarian, she had a natural inclination towards ships. And the Liveships on the Flotilla were amongst the largest of the Galaxy. But these? They were just on a whole other scale. Imagine the space one could fit on these ships. What were the engines of these monstrous vessels like? And most mystifyingly, how could they operate these ships without element zero?

This was, well, beyond what her wildest of dreams could have hoped for. As the daughter of an Admiral, a lot of pressure was put on her to return with a pilgrimage gift that would truly impact the fleet. It had to be something more than a huge stock of credits, a large cache of supplies, or even a ship. While any one of those would have been acceptable - and any captain would gladly accept her as a crew member - it was insufficient for her. She would return, she determined, with something that would truly help her people - something that would put her race a step closer to one day reclaiming their home.

Fate, it would seem, had leaped onto her lap. The findings she would make here could have a profound impact on the Flotilla - perhaps more so than any other pilgrimage. What if she figured out how these ships traveled without eezo? Element zero was the most fundamental - and rarest - commodity on the fleet. It determined virtually everything the Quarians did. But what if this newly discovered tech no longer made it a necessity? To think that her people would no longer need to be bound to the confines of eezo rich systems; that their ships need no longer to discharge the buildup up of static electricity after every jump, or that millions of hours of labor be dedicated to mining. And what kind of electronics and computing technology did these beings possesses? Perhaps she would come across new shielding technology as well. After all, all shields used eezo to stop kinetic projectiles. If these beings did not use eezo, then perhaps they came

up with a different way to create shields - and weapons for that matter, as they too operated on element zero. In fact, now that she thought about it, it was astonishing just how reliant on eezo the galaxy was. As much as she despised the Council, she now understood why they had deemed this situation classified. This could change everything the galaxy thought they knew about science.

"Fascinating isn't it?"

Slightly startled, Tali turned to find an Asari standing behind her.

She chuckled, "Sorry, I didn't mean to startle you." She bowed. "I am Liara T'Soni, head archeologist for the mission."

"Oh, um, it's alright. My name is Tali'Zorah nar Rayya, but you can call me Tali."

"Okay Tali. So you're the leading engineer on the team, what do you think we'll find?" Liara asked.

"Honestly? I have no idea. Technology is similar among every species. There are differences of course; due to physiology, culture, and thought process among the various races. The way a Quarian configures an engine core is distinctly different than that of an Asari, but in the end both operate on the same principles and perform the same functions. Our species may be different but the laws of physics that govern us are not."

Liara nodded, and Tali continued. "But this" she pointed to her datapad, "I've never seen anything like this. Galactic society is centered on the use of element zero. Without it, you have no FTL flight - no FTL communications - no shields - no artificial gravity - no biotics - and of course, no mass relays. The entire galaxy's technology is based off element zero. So to discover a race that developed technology without it, I simply have nothing to compare it to. It's so alien."

"Do you think they were more advanced than us?"

"I don't know. One would think that any society that didn't use element zero would be primitive. But the size of these ships - the enormous space elevator; it is obvious these beings had a firm grasp of physics, and their engineering abilities are awe inspiring. They created a ship that was over 27 kilometers long - imagine the complexity of such a construction. And a space station that reached to the planet surface - only in science fiction did such a thing exist."

"Yes, it is truly amazing. Imagine what we can learn from these beings."

"Probably not anything useful" a third, slightly flanged voice spoke, gaining their attention. They both stared at the interrupter, a Turian, for a few awkward seconds.

"Ah, my apologies" he said. He placed his right arm over his chest "I'm responsible for the security of Alenna's team."

"Security?" Liara asked quizzically "For what? I thought the CEC said

that there was no intelligent life in the system."

"No, they said that they didn't find signs of intelligent life. That doesn't necessarily mean nobody's home. And that also doesn't mean that there aren't traps in these ruins. For all we know we could walk right into a slew of automated defenses."

"Oh, right, of course" Liara replied. The Turian was right. Although she didn't necessarily like the idea of having an armed guard hovering over her during her excavations, she would like it less to be gunned down by an automated turret.

The Turian stepped to the view port window they were standing by, gazing off into the infinite blackness. Liara spoke. "What did you about not learning anything useful?"

"Oh, I was speaking philosophical wise, not technological. There's plenty we can learn from their technology, but about their culture? I wouldn't be surprised if they were as violent as the Krogan."

"Why would you say that?" Tali asked.

He looked at Tali with slight disdain. His glare unnerved her, but eventually he replied. "Look, these ships are impressive, but they are clearly war ships. What does that tell you?"

It was Liara who answered. "It tells us these beings - likely two different races - were in a war, and nothing else. Just because they fought a war doesn't mean they are violent. All of our species have fought wars in the past. The Rachni Wars lasted three centuries. The Krogan Rebellions claimed millions of lives. It would be unfair to judge an entire species on such tragic occurrences."

"Maybe, but it's not just the ships. Look at the planet. It was completely devastated. The civilized species of the Galaxy banned planetary bombardment and destruction of Garden worlds. Only the Krogan proved destructive enough to violate these rules during the Rebellions." He looked at Liara; she obviously didn't agree with what he had said. "Look, all I'm saying is that, engineering marvels aside, these beings probably aren't all-knowing, all-wise mystical creatures. For whatever reason, these two sides fought. And the last thing the Council needs is another lesser species to cause trouble for the rest of us. Or have you forgotten so easily about how the Quarians" he nodded towards Tali "unleashed the Geth upon the galaxy?"

The mention of 'lesser species' caused Tali to rage inside. She was well used to these kinds of insults and attitudes directed towards her and her people. "My people didn't unleash anything! The Geth was a mistake we tried to prevent. And maybe we would have if the cowardly Council didn't violate their promise of protecting us as an associate race. Instead they abandoned us as the Geth systematically wiped out most of our race." She glared at him. "And even that wouldn't have been so bad if the Council had decided to aid what survivors were left. But no, instead they kicked us out of Citadel space and left us to fend for ourselves!" she yelled. She was fuming. Usually, she could let insults slide, but there was something about this Turian that just made her gut clench.

The Turian didn't back down. "It is a fate well deserved" he said

dismissively. "The Quarians broke the Citadel laws concerning the creation of AI's. All crimes should not go unpunished"

"Crime? Like when the Turians unleashed the Genophage against the Krogan?" she exclaimed, fists clenching.

"No, not a crime. The Krogan waged an unprovoked war against the Council. They got what they deserved as well."

"Of course they did! The Council prematurely uplifted a species and turned their entire race into a weapon. And then when they naturally overstepped their bounds the Council enacted a policy of \*\*Genocide \*\*against them."

"Do not judge us Quarian" he replied, venom seeping from his words. "Know your place vagrant."

Liara was drifting between the two with a worried look. "Uh, we're all working towards the same goal here. There's no need to fight."

The Turian glared at Liara, causing her to step back unconsciously. He eventually turned his gaze back towards Tali. "I'll be watching you Quarian. This technology is classified, and I was tasked by the Council with ensuring it stays that way. If you try to take any of it with you back to your fleet, I'll stop you." He then turned to leave.

Tali's blood was on fire. She was seething, more so than she ever had before. Just before the Turian made it through the door she yelled out. "Just who do you think you are that you can tell me what to do!"

He stopped just at the exit and turned his head towards her. "My name is Saren Arterius. And I'm a Specter." He then turned and left.

\* \* \*

><p>One hour later</p>

The main research team gathered in the CIC of the \*\*Seloria\*\*. Relay 314 was clearly visible from the front observation window; the enormous ancient machine growing increasingly larger. Tali was still slightly flustered from the 'conversation' earlier. Liara seemed to notice this. "Are you alright? Don't let that bigot get to you."

"No, I'm fine. Really, I'm used to it." She turned to Liara and smiled, a gesture hidden beneath her visor. "Thanks for your concern though. It's been a while since someone asked me how I felt."

"No problem" Liara replied. "My mother always taught me to not rush to conclusions and make judgments based on stereotypes."

"Your mother sounds like a very bright woman" Tali said, trying not to think of how much she missed her own mother.

"Yeah." To Tali's surprise Liara glanced down, a look of sadness on her face. She was about to ask if Liara was okay when Forbin, the ship's navigational officer spoke up.

"Relay 314 in range. Initiating transmission sequence. Calculating mass and destinationâ€|Connection receivedâ€|Hitting the Relay in 3, 2, 1â€|"

As the ship neared towards the massive monolith a blue stream of energy shot out from the relay's spinning core, enveloping the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_ and the dozens of other research vessels around it. The relay then shot the ships across the endless void of space at unfathomable speeds. Instantly, the exploratory team arrived in the Tyrogg system.

Lenora immediately identified the six Turian ships that had secured the system a day earlier. She was surprised about how much force the Turians had inserted into the system. Three frigates, two cruisers, and a single dreadnaught was more than enough fire power to deal with anything that might come their way. Korven, the ships communications officer, transmitted to the dreadnaught. "Hierarchy Dreadnaught \_\*\*Majestic Spirits\*\*\_, this the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_ carrying the research teams for Project Discovery."

"Understood. Proceed as planned" came the reply over the radio.

"Forbin, bring us into orbit around the planet. Take us near the space elevator." Alenna said. How they were going to study the ruins and which they were going to study first had already been planned out before the trip.

"Yes Captain. Engaging FTL drives now." It only took a few moments for the Seloria to reach the planet from the Relay.  
"Exitingâ€|now."

The Seloria, along with several others of the research vessels, exited FTL just outside the orbiting debris. Gasps were audible as the research team took in the wreckage. Even the crew of the Seloria who had already seen the debris was once again left nearly speechless at the awesome sight. The ship headed to the space elevator, passing by the monstrous sized dreadnaught - U-1 - which now had the unofficial title of \_The Leviathan.\_

"Keelah. This isâ€|Iâ€|Wow!" Tali was awestruck. The \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_ looked like a tiny pest compared to the size of the \_Leviathan\_, and they were just traveling by one part of it - the small part! Eventually tearing her gaze from the massive ship, she observed the others as well, which were equally as breathtaking. Despite the size of the smooth, purple ships, she actually liked the designs of the other ships better. The angular, bulky ships reminded her of Quarion architecture she had seen in the history vids.

Liara was just as dumbstruck. She didn't say anything, but just stared at the \_Leviathan\_ - mouth agape - in utter astonishment. Tali laughed. "You still there Liara?"

"Huh? Oh yeah. Sorry." She glanced across the floating debris. "Goddess, this is amazing. I had seen the pictures, but seeing it in person? It's incredible!"

"Approaching the space elevator" Forbin said. Slowly the elevator came into view; it's unfathomably long strands reaching to the planet

surface.

"Captain, take a look at this" Lenora said. The space elevator came to view on the main screen. "There's a large cylindrical hole that has pierced through the entire station, similar to the damage of other ships. I think it would make a good entry point for the shuttle."

Alenna nodded. "Everyone, this is what we came here for. I want the research team suited up and ready to deploy. You'll be operating in a zero g environment so make sure your magnetic boots are functioning properly. You've all been briefed. You know what to look for. Any objects small enough to carry - especially electronic devices - may be taken to one of the designated research vessels where scientists onboard will conduct thorough studies. Finding computer terminals is high priority, as well as any weapons systems." She glanced at the space elevator just waiting to be explored. "Well, let's do this."

The research team sprung into action, heading to the lower decks to put on the suits. Tali didn't need to wear one thanks to her envirosuit. However she did need oxygen, as her suit reserves would only last a couple of minutes in the void of space. Fortunately, her suit was compatible with standard oxygen filters which could produce breathable air for 40 continuous hours.

Tali snapped the oxygen filter in place on her back and then proceeded to the shuttle. Eventually, the others came filing out as well. Tali spotted Liara among the team, dressed in a form-fitting white environment suit provided by the Citadel. "You ready?" Tali asked as they boarded the shuttle with the rest of the team.

"Ready? I'm ecstatic. I can hardly contain my excitement" Liara replied with enthusiasm.

"Is everyone aboard?" Alenna asked. She was about to close the door when a lone figure entered the shuttle, grasping an assault rifle. Tali's feelings of excitement and wonder suddenly dropped when she saw Saren enter. Some of the other passengers seemed to react negatively as well.

"Uh, right. We're ready to go then" Alenna said. She closed the shuttle door and input the coordinate commands into the console computer. The hangar of the \*\*Seloria\*\* opened, and the shuttle's thruster roared to life. Exiting the ship, the shuttle's auto piloting drifted seamlessly towards the wide gaping hole of the space elevator. The shuttle lacked artificial gravity, causing Tali to grab tightly against her seat restraints as to stop her body from floating around. Unfortunately there were no windows, so she couldn't see where they were. After a couple of minutes of drifting the thrusters once again kicked in, causing the shuttle to shake. There was one more final rumble, and then the shuttle's door blinked green.

Alenna unstrapped her harness. "Okay, we're here." She moved to the exit and opened the door. "Let's go." Immediately the team followed the Captain's example, un-strapping their harnesses and filing out. Once Tali was out of the shuttle she activated the magnets on her boots. There was a loud thud - metal on metal - as her heels dropped to the surface. Almost losing balance, she spread her arms out to keep from falling. Once she regained herself she looked around the

large room the shuttle had entered.

What she saw astonished her.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: We're now starting to get into the heart of the story. One of the things I wanted to do in this chapter was get a little more in-depth with the characters, as it's something I think has been lacking in this story.\*\*

\*\*As always, thanks for all of your reviews and criticism. Honestly, I was not expecting to get over a hundred reviews. Thanks for reading.\*\*

## 6. Chapter 6: Strangers in a Strange Land

\*\*\*Update\*\*\* \*\*He. Whoops. Looks like I got my AI's messed up. For some reason I put Athena as Michael's AI rather than the \_planned \_Aris. Guess that's what happens when you take so long to post a new chapter. I've fixed it in the update. Also, about the potential romance thing. I'm not saying their will be romance. There might, there might not. It was added more for humor than anything, although in the future I might incorporate romance between characters. (And again, not necessarily between the two below.) \*\*

\*\*Also, about the augmentation process. Yeah, I decided to pretty much scrap most of it all together. Mainly because I didn't want to write an entire chapter of nothing but Michael in a hospital bed. A more experienced writer could make it interesting; I'm still a novice (license to screw up :P)\*\*

\*\*Last note: Some have complained about not having enough action. Be patient. I assure it's coming. I have to set the right tone first. I didn't want to make this another mindless gun toting flick and the Council/UNSC start pointlessly conquering each other in an unrealistic confrontation. But worry not, the battles will come.

><strong>

\* \* \*

><p>UNSCURS 3rd Garrison Training Facility Headquarters - Underground Bunker

What he saw astonished him.

"Thisâ€|is this what I think it is?" Michael eyes were fixated on the tank in the center of the research lab. He blinked, still not sure if what he was seeing was real.

He, along with the N7's head of research Dr. Himesh - an old, dark skinned man with vicious scars ravaged throughout his face - were deep underground Shanxi's Training Facility headquarters.

A wide grin crossed Dr. Himesh's face. "And what do you think it is?"

"Thisâ€|this is Spartan Armor."

"Yes."

"You meanâ€| Iâ€| I'm going to be wearing Spartan Armor as an N7 agent?" he asked in disbelief.

"Yes."

Michael was in a state of shock. He knew all about the Spartans - everyone did. They were humanity's greatest heroes; the best warriors' the human race ever produced. Without them, human kind would have undoubtedly become extinct. So to be standing in the presence of Spartan Armor, in the presence of one of the greatest technological achievements in human history, something that even made the covenant look on in envy, there were simply no words.

A shiver raced across Michael's back. Can this really be happening? Michael had always looked upon the Spartans for encouragement and inspiration. The Spartans had become near mythical in human society. Michael idolized them; whenever he thought life was too much to bear he looked upon them for strength. He remembered playing 'Spartan's vs. Covenant' in his family's farm fields as a kid, just as practically all human children did when they were young. After all, who wouldn't want to become a Spartan? They killed aliens and weren't afraid of anything! And now, he actually has a chance to become one. Goosebumps ran through his body at that thought.

"What you're looking at is the MJOLNIR Mark VIII Powered Assault Armor. It is the most advanced combat exoskeleton to date. It's powered by a next generation fusion-plasma hybrid power system, giving it 8X the power of previous models. The suit has advanced force-multiplying circuits located throughout the armor which, when worn, triples the strength of the user. And unlike previous models, the circuits have been calibrated with advanced internal computing systems that allow un-augmented humans to use it without worry of breaking bones from the suits enhanced speed and movements."

Michael didn't say anything, but just continued to stare at the 7 foot tall blue armor in awe. The orange polarized visor glared back at him, his face clearly visible in its reflection; as if the armor itself was piercing into his soul, determining if he was worthy of its power. Dr. Himesh continued. "The helmet is linked directly to your neural interface, allowing for near supernatural enhanced sensory input, as well as complete control of the suits system by thought. In essence, when worn, you 'become' the armor. In addition, the helmet has filters to remove toxins from the atmosphere, thermal and motion sensors, advanced communication systems, and solar-powered lighting. Of course, one of the most important features is the AI housing, allowing an AI to be linked directly to your suit and your mind."

"I'm going to be linked with an AI?"

"Yes. When in battle you will be accompanied with a 4th generation smart AI." Michael was surprised. AI's did not come cheap, especially a 4th generation version. It seems the UNSC went all out on this project, not leaving any expense behind.

Dr. Himesh gestured to the sleek blue armor with a few black stripes flowing ethereally down the suit. "The armor is composed of a new

molecular Titanium Alloy - reverse engineered from Forerunner metals. It is much lighter than previous alloys, yet nearly twice as strong." As Michael study it, he realized that Himesh was right. Although it was unmistakably Spartan Armor, it was much leaner and less bulky than previous versions. Dr. Himesh continued. "It's virtually impervious to small arm fires, and can take significant punishment even from artillery. But the most important innovation is its high resistance to plasma fire. In previous Mark models, one or two hits from plasma would compromise the armor plating. However this alloy is nearly 10X as resistant, and the alloy itself has refracted coating which disperses heat caused by plasma weaponry."

Himesh took out a lighter and lit cigarette, taking a long, deep breath before continuing. "Underneath the Armor is a Titanium Nanocomposite bodysuit. It has numerous functions, which are vital for keeping the user safe. The material is very strong, yet at the same time highly flexible, and serves as an extra layer of protection against ballistic and plasma fire. Within the bodysuit is a gel-filled layer that can reactively change density and conform to the wearer's body. In extreme environmental conditions it regulates the temperature of the body, maintaining homeostasis. One of the more notable functions of the gel is how it can be pressurized to absorb tremendous amount of damage upon impact. While previous models had this gel, this suit is different in the fact that improved sensors, as well as neural and AI interfaces, allow for near instantaneous gel reaction. As soon as the user is stricken, that area of the bodysuit instantly reacts - pressurizing the gel and substantially softening the impact. The final innovation is the bodysuits medical interface. Unlike other models where the system would inject biofoam to the body in case of injury, this system uses the new Medigel technology, which regenerates tissue and heals wounds, instead of just temporarily stopping blood loss. Oh, and as a bonus it doesn't hurt like hell when you use it either" Dr. Himesh said with a smile. Michael nodded, knowing firsthand the painful effects of the soon to be outdated biofoam.

"Of course, all of this armor protection is assuming the enemy gets passed your shields. The energy shielding, powered by the suit's fusion-plasma power reactor, can take much heavier punishments than current shields. It lasts longer under sustained fire and its recharge time is much quicker. A new innovation is the limited shaping of the energy shield, allowing for partial overlaps, which can increase the shield strength of the specific area taking damage."

Dr. Himesh exhaled, the smoke lingering around the two, giving off a musky scent. "These are just some of the more notable features I've mentioned. There are plenty of other new capabilities as well, which you will soon learn, such as a jetpack system capable of sustained flight and camouflage technology. An important one which hopefully you will use quite often is the new slip-space insertion technology."

"Slip-space insertion?" Michael asked.

"Yes, I'm sure you've heard of the UNSC and URS attempts to reverse-engineer the forerunner teleportation grid technology. There's still a lot we don't know, however we've made breakthroughs in recent years. The technology incases an objects in a compressed slipstream field, instantly transporting them from one position to

another. It's essentially the same way a ship travels between star systems, although much more accurate. While we've been able to use this technology on ships to 'teleport' equipment and cargo to planets, we've yet to understand how the Forerunner's could send organics through without protection from slip-space radiation. Fortunately, the Mark VIII powered combat suits incredibly strong forerunner alloy can block the deadly radiation from killing the user inside."

"So I'll be able to teleport into the battlefield wherever I wish?" Michael asked. The thought of such a strategic advantage was overwhelming.

"With limits" Himesh replied. He took another long drag of his cigarette. "Slip-space insertion takes up tremendous energy, so you'll have to wait a while for the ship's slip-space generator to recharge. And the insertion distance is limited as well. We can transport you from a ship to planet-side; maybe even from one planet to its moon if the distance is close enough, but that's about the limit of its range."

"This is amazing." Michael said, more to himself than to the doctor.

"Yes, it's one of a kind" another, feminine voice spoke, drawing Michael's attention. An AI materialized In the Holo-projector next to the suit. "Hello Michael, I'm Aris. You and I will be partners from now on."

Michael studied the AI. She was, like most Artificial Intelligences, ethereally beautiful; computerized perfection that could not fall victim to the bodily effects of organics. She was tall, with a beautiful, angular face that Michael thought would probably make any model rage with envy. Her straight hair reached just past her shoulders, not a strain out of place. Her attire was simple - a formfitting white blouse, coupled with a white dress skirt that reached just past her knees. He noticed she didn't wear any shoes, instead choosing to be bare foot. But the most remarkable aspect of her physical appearance to Michael was not her perfect body, it was her eyes. They were kind. Gentle even - yet at the same time he could detect both stunning intelligence and devious calculation behind them.

"So, you're going to be linked with my mind?" Michael asked, not at all to fond with the idea of another conscience roaming through his brain.

Aris seemed to pick up on his discomfort. She gave a soft, kind chuckle. "Don't worry my dear; I can't access your thoughts. Us AI's aren't that powerful. Well, not yet anyway."

Michael nodded, still not entirely satisfied. He turned to face Dr. Himesh. "So, when do I get to try this baby out?"

"Soon." Is all Himesh said.

"How soon?" Michael said, slightly peeved. "If I'm to be prepared I have to have intimate knowledge of the suit and its systems."

"This isn't just some military toy that we can whip up whenever we

want. This is one of the most advanced combat systems ever produced. The UNSC wants to make sure you're ready for it." Himesh took another long breath of the intoxicating tobacco. "Personally, I think it was a mistake choosing you."

Michael raised a brow. "A mistake."

"Kid, you haven't even had any real experience in combat. Don't get me wrong, your performance in war exercises is unparalleled, but there's a fine line between simulations and actual combat. There's no debriefing after the battle for you to study what you did wrong. If you fail, you, and your men, will die. You need to understand that."

"I am well aware of the consequ -"

"No, you're not" Himesh interrupted. "You may think you know, but you don't. Once you're on the battlefield; once you have plasma fly passed your head; once you realize that your survival is as every bit dependent on your skills as it is luck; then you'll understand. But until then, you don't."

"And you do?" Michael replied, more bluntly than he intended.

Himesh smiled. "Kid, I've seen things you would never dream of. Before you were even conceived I was fighting the Covenant during the Battle of the Ar -"

"Oh will you can it you old prune" Aris interrupted with a light, playful scolding. She turned to Michael. "You'll have to forgive him; he thinks that everyone born after the war is a bunch of softies."

"That's because they are. People these days, they're more spoiled than a fat kid in a chocolate factory. They have no idea what sacrifice means."

Aris sighed and rolled her eyes. "Whatever you say doctor." She turned to Michael with a warm, comforting smile. For some reason it made Michael relax, and he couldn't help but smile back. "It'll take about a day or two to finish the suits final diagnostics before we deem it ready for use. Until then, I suggest you meet your new team. They're currently assembled in the facilities mess hall."

Michael nodded. He had been itching to know who his squad mates would be. At first he was concerned by the fact that he would be commanding some aliens, as humans and the URS species operate distinctly different on the battlefield. However, he reassured himself that they would be the best of the best of their perspective species, and that they would conduct themselves with the upmost professionalism.

He was unfathomably wrong.

\* \* \*

><p>"Watch it shit face dummy!"</p>

Michael stammered back, taking a good luck at the Unggoy he had accidentally bumped into on his way to the mess hall. "Uh, what did you call me?"

"You heard me boob head." Michael raised a brow. He'd been called many strange things before, but boob head?

The Unggoy's face shifted in recognition. "Wait, I know you, you're the human everyone's talking about on the N7 team. Pfff, you look like a pussy to me. I hope you're as good as they say."

Michael was getting annoyed by this foulmouthed grunt. "Look, I'm just trying to get to the messâ€| wait" Michael suddenly wondered. "How do you know about the N7 project?"

The Unggoy grinned mischievously - or at least what Michael thought looked like a grin. Aliens were hard to read. "Yaypa's the name. I'm the team's explosives tech."

"\_You? \_You're on the N7 team?" Michael asked incredulously. No, he thought, that can't be right.

"Damn straight ass face. You're looking at the finest damn explosions expert in the galaxy."

"Yaypa! Will you quit your yapping. Show the human some respect" another voice called out. The Unggoy grunted as a Sangheili walked up to the pair. "Ah, you must be Michael Shepard. I've heard a lot about you. I am Stramus S'lorai, the team's swords master. You'll have to forgive Yaypa's rather odd vocabulary. He has an unnatural infatuation with human curses."

"Yeah, I can see that. Wait, you're on the N7 team too?" Michael was equally surprised. He had fought with plenty of Sangheili in the past. What he hadn't done was fight with female Sangheili. "I've heard rumors of their existence, but I've actually never seen a female Sangheili warrior."

Stramus nodded. "We are a rare breed." She gestured down the hall. "Shall we meet the rest of our team?"

"Yes, I like to familiarize myself with the people I'm fighting with." The unlikely trio began to make their way to the mess. As they walked Michael stole a look at his Sangheili counterpart. She was a stunning specimen, no doubt about that. She displayed an air of confidence, yet at the same time held a natural grace in her movements. Her 'hair' - or the Sangheili equivalent - was braided in blue and gold bands that dropped to her slender shoulders. A white headband kept a gemstone attached to her forehead - a common decoration for females of her species. During his time at Shanxi he had learned that the color of these gemstones had different meanings. A ruby gemstone meant that a female has bonded - or married in human terms. Yellow, white, or orange were typically worn by children and adolescence. Stramus' gemstone was turquoise - meaning she was un-bonded and of age to mate. She wore a civilian Sangheili dress that reminded him of the ancient Japanese Kimono dresses. The blue dress had a wide neck which hung gently over her shoulders displaying her tanish skin tone, and clung tightly to her slender form. Michael had seen many female Sangheili in his lifetime, and he was always stunned by how human they looked. Sure, they were still alien, but the similarities between female Sangheili and Humans were striking, and the difference between male and female Sangheili was stark. Michael was no xenophile, but he couldn't help but appreciate the

aesthetic beauty of female Sangheili. Her cat-like eyes, yellow with pure black pupils, glanced at Michael, who quickly turned his gaze away.

Stramus smiled. "Checking me up Commander?"

"What? No! I was just, um, admiring your dress. Why are you wearing it?"

"Unlike Humans we Sangheili don't have standard military dress uniform. We are either in battle armor or not. When we're not fighting, we are in our civilian clothes." Stramus replied.

"Really? I didn't know that." Michael was surprised. The warrior culture of the Sangheili always seemed rigid to him. It was difficult to see them in anything other than their militaristic life style - despite the amount of time he spent around them after they rescued him. "So, you're a Swordsman?"

"Among other things. My true area of expertise is actually infiltration. We females may not be as strong as our males, but what we lack in strength we make up for in speed and flexibility" Stramus replied with a grin.

Michael chuckled. "I'll keep that in mind." Most humans wouldn't have understood the humor that was just displayed. His time spent around the Sangheili had taught him much about their culture - including male Sangheili's favorite aspect of females.

"Great" Yappa said. "When we run into enemies, you can shake your ass at them. Maybe distract them while we men blow them to hell." Stramus gave Yappa a dangerous glare. If looks could kill, Yappa would have been vaporized. His humorous attitude dropped instantly. "I mean, because you look so great" he said, slowing his stride slightly to cover himself behind Michael.

Stramus sighed. "Do you know what you need Yappa? A nice Unggoy woman to teach you some manners."

"Apologies Stramus, but the Great Yappa only has one love in his life, and that's the sweet sound of explosions." Yappa replied, his arrogant tone returning.

"Of course Yappa, how could I be so foolish?" Stramus turned her attention to Michael. "What about you Commander? I know you lived in an exclusively Sangheili colony during your adolescent years. Did you find any young Sangheili ladies to spend time with?"

"What!" Michael was left nearly speechless. "Isn't thatâ€|couldn't weâ€|is that not taboo?"

Stramus chuckled. "I'm more open-minded than most. The older generations may disapprove of such relationships but the younger generations are a lot moreâ€|socially open." Stramus was right. Michael had heard plenty of instances - particularly here in Shanxi - about cross-species relations. He once met a woman in a bar who bragged about being laid by a Sangheili. He never understood it himself. It seemed almost like bestiality to him. But with the slender female Sangheili? Well, at least they weren't hideous looking like most other non-humans. Maybe he could understand the

attractionâ€¦he thought, stealing a glance at Stramus' slim figure.

\_Wait, what the hell am I thinking?\_ He shook the thoughts from his mind. "Sorry Stramus, I'm going to have to agree with Yappya on this one. I'm married to the UNSC."

"Such a shame, perhaps you could have made a Sangheili woman very happy. After all, Human males have become quite the exotic flavor for Sangheili women." Stramus grinned. "Human men may be small, but they're larger than Sangheili men where it truly counts, if you know what I mean."

Heat flushed to Michaels face. Before he could respond the trio made it to the Mess Hall entrance. \_Thank God, \_he thought.\_

Like most places on Shanxi, the room was large to accommodate larger species. The mess was empty, save for nine beings of varying species. Dominating the room were two Mgalekgolo brothers; the giant beasts clad in their armor - more like walking tanks than soldiers. On a center table sat seven other beings - the rest of the N7 team - two Humans, three Sangheili, and two Unggoy. Everyone was clustered among their own kind, quietly talking amongst themselves. Michael examined the group. Everyone in this room, himself included, was strangers. But they will soon become comrades, and if they are going to survive, they have to work together as a team. What he was seeing now was \_not\_ a team. A collective group of highly skilled soldiers, yes, but not a unified force. "I hope everyone here is as open to others as you are Stramus."

"Well," Stramus said, "as you Humans say, it's time to break the ice."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Yeah, I'm not dead. So sorry about the super long wait. Needless to say, I've been very busy the past two weeks. (I was actually planning to upload yesterday but a timely earthquake knocking out our internet connection ruined that).<strong> \*\*\*Hopefully\* I'll have more time to update faster from now on.\*\*

\*\*The female Sangheili look is based off of Halo Legends episode 2: The Duel  
><strong>

\*\*Thanks for all of your reviews and messages.\*\* \*\*You guys are great.\*\*

## 7. Chapter 7: Wandering

### Tyrogg System â€“ Space Elevator

It was dark. The great walls of titanium that enveloped them looked all but impenetrable. Their lights flashed across the walls and its vast surroundings, trying â€“ and failing, to reach the seemingly never ending room.

It was huge.

Tali couldn't discern one end from the other. The room seemed infinite and slightly foreboding.

"It seems endless" Liara spoke, voicing the group's thoughts.

The group ventured forward into the darkness. "According to the thermal sensors of the \*\*Seloria\*\*, this room is 3.12 kilometers in length and 300 meters in height" Mordin said. "Given the size and location, it is likely a docking bay."

Although they had yet to come across anything of interest, the layout of the room showed empirically that this station once had artificial gravity. And the stations design showed that it was not produced by centrifugal force either. Not that anyone thought any differently, but it was still hard to understand how it was done without eezo. Just another mystery to be solved.

As the group continued to walk forward Tali soon realized that much of the room was empty. No docked ships, no strange looking weird tech, not even any computer interfaces. It was clear that all of these things used to be here, as evidence by torn wires and cables. It is as if someone came through and swept the area of everything tech oriented. Even the white tile floor seemed unnaturally clean, despite the visual damage from the outside of the station. Perhaps everything useful had been cleared out after the battle, Tali thought. It made sense, but she hoped it wasn't so.

The group continued to inch forward, still finding nothing that hinted at advanced technology. Despite this Liara â€“ who was snapping photos and shooting vids left and right from her omni-tool – was utterly intrigued with the architecture. It was clear that this station had taken tremendous damage, and yet the interior still remained relatively intact. The great imposing walls had complex geometric designs etched in them. It was a strange mix of hard edged shapes and soft, curved lines. If Liara had to describe it, she would say it'sâ€|enduring? Resilient? Or maybe just stubborn. Something told her that its creators wouldn't back down from a challenge. Of course, this was all just speculation on her part. Just because they built big and enduring didn't mean that they were themselves. In truth they could be tiny, frail creatures for all she knew. Every now and then she would see words written on hanging signs, above doorways, and on walls in some strange alien language. Perhaps they were words of great wisdom or knowledge.

'\*\*Restroom Ahead'\*\*

'\*\*Dining to the Left (Kids eat free!)\*\*'

'\*\*Do not spit over docking ledge. Thank you'\*\*

If only she could read them, what amazing things she could learn. Tali was less enthusiastic than Liara. She had hoped to find new and incredible technology, not an empty room. She had to remind herself that they still had the whole station left to explore. They were bound to come across somethiâ€|\_\*crunch\*\_

Tali stopped at the sound of a soft crunch under her magnetic boot. She looked down to see she had stepped on a piece of white material. Quickly stepping off, she trained her light on it. It was small â€“

about the size of her hand — rectangular, and flat.

"What is this?" she said out loud, gaining everyone's attention. Soon practically every light source was trained on the small object at Tali's feet. There were tiny scribbles of the alien language on it.

'\_Mom, Dad and Jessica — Utgard Riverwalk, 2513'\_

Tali picked it up. It was a bit flimsy, although not overly so. "If only we could read it" Liara said, once again voicing the group's thoughts.

Pushing a few buttons on his holographic interface, Mordin was soon scanning the object with his Omni-tool. "Hm, Object is primarily composed of polymer compounds and high-yield plastics. The material is malleable, although upon release will retain its rectangular shape. I'm also picking up very thin electrical wires threaded in the material."

"Here", Alenna said, retrieving a clear bag from her pocket suit. "We'll bag it and examine it when we return."

Tali was about to place the object in the bag when a sudden shout halted her. "Wait! Look on the other side, it's beginning to light up!"

Unbeknownst to the group, the Flexible photo screen Tali was holding was powered by light. When the sensitive miniature solar receivers were struck by the group's light source, it quickly converted it to electrical energy.

Tali quickly turned the object over as the whole group huddled around to see. The thin screen flickered a few times, struggling to power up. Finally the screen flashed on, displaying a clear image.

Everyone gasped.

The screen displayed a photo of three creatures standing alongside a river with tall buildings in the background. Physically, they had the same body composition as most of the bipedal citadel races. Two of the creatures were standing behind a smaller one with their hand the small one's shoulders. All three were smiling, or at least doing what an Asari, Quarian or Salarian did when they smiled. Liara was struck by how similar they looked to her own species. The creatures had two eyes, a protruding nose, a mouth and two ears. Facially, these beings were near identical to an Asari's face. But that's where the similarities ended. Unlike Asari, these creatures seemed to have fine strands of long fur on top of their heads. She noticed that the one on the right and the small one in the middle had longer strands that ran past their shoulders, while the one on the left had short strands. The fine strands were also aligned above each of their eyes as well. She also noticed that the two with the longer strands had body shapes very similar to Asari and Quarian females, while the one on the left seemed be a lot more muscularly built.

The beings were clothed in fabrics of a variety of colors. The small one wore an Asari equivalent of a dress — bright yellow with designs that could only be some kind of flowers stitched in. The two

taller ones wore shirts and long pants that covered their legs. The beings had what appeared to be jewelry on their wrists, around their necks, and even on their ears.

"They look so exotic" Alenna said.

" â€“ and soâ€¢|similar" another Asari said.

She was right, Liara thought. This whole time she had imagined that they would probably be giant creatures â€“ stern and imposing like their architecture. She couldn't decide if the similarities â€“ at least in aesthetic appearances â€“ were exciting or nerve-wracking. She settled for both. One thing was certain, they definitely didn't fit the description of massive war-like beast that many had suspected based on the sheer size of their constructions. She briefly wondered why a species of their size would bother building so big.

"You sure you Asari don't have inter-galactic cousins you never told us about" a Turian replied jokingly, gaining a few chuckles from the group.

"Two tall beings and a smaller one â€“ pre-adolescent most likely. The being on the left has a distinctly different bone structure and muscular mass than the other two. Close contact suggest familiarity." Mordin analyzed.

"Mother, father, and child" Liara inferred, transfixed on the image. These beings looked, at least to her Asari eyes, truly happy and at peace. There were some things that transcended across species, and the display of genuine joy was one of them. Even though she had never seen these creatures before, she knew what emotions they were displaying (It didn't hurt that they looked so similar either). She could see the pure hopefulness in the child's eyes, as if the future held no fear â€“ that everything was going to be okay. She then remembered the scarred planet surface and destroyed ruins, and a wave of sadness suddenly hit her. Did they survive whatever wrath of destruction was wrought here?

"\_\*Seloria\*\_ , are you receiving the feed?" Alenna asked, zooming in with her camera.

"Affirmative" Forbin replied over the comms. "The xeno-biologists are already scouring over the image as we speak."

"Good." She turned her attention back to the group. "Come on let's keep searching." Reluctantly, the group backed away from the image and Tali placed it in the bag. Eventually the group continued forward. "According to our thermal imaging, there's a passage up ahead which leads to the center of the construct. The scientists believe it might be the main control center of this station. That's where we'll be heading." Alenna explained.

"I wonder if we'll find any bodies" a Turian said. That sent a shiver down Liara's spine.

"That would be ideal" Mordin replied. "A specimen to study would give us great insights into these beings, but it's doubtful. Look around. It's clear that this place has been cleared out. Never-the-less there's bound to be graves we can dig up on the planet surface" he said nonchalantly.

"What! We can't dig up graves. That's against citadel law!" Liara said flabbergasted.

"Actually" the deep voice of Saren said, "the Citadel has granted us exemption from normal archeological procedures."

"But disturbing graves is wrong!" she shouted, anger boiling over. This was not what she came here for.

"We can discuss the ethics of procedures later" Alenna said. "Let's keep moving." Liara let out an audible huff of agitation, but eventually moved along with the rest of the group.

The group passed countless corridors, hallways and rooms on their way to the center of the station. Still, the place seemed empty of anything technological, much to the disappointment of the team. As they pressed forward, the darkness seemed to deepen. Even with their lights, the blackness was thick. It took a good 30 minutes to reach the main entrance of what seemed to be the main control hub. Unfortunately, the steel door was closed shut.

"This is Alenna" she said over her comms unit. "We've made it to the entrance of the central chamber, but a door is blocking our path. We can't get through. We need assiâ€!"

As Alenna relayed the news to the \*\*Seloria, \*\*Tali noticed a computer interface next to the door. On it was the shape of a five fingered hand. Curiosity driving her, she walked up to it and placed her three digit hand over the screen.

Two things happened. First, the lights of the station flickered to life. Then a loud, beeping alarm blared off, and a strange alien voice spoke over unseen intercoms, speaking in an incomprehensible language.

"\*\*Powering main Control Bridge. Reserve power activated. This station has been offline forâ€|66 daysâ€|"\*\*

The sudden shock of activity and booming voice caused everyone to jump in surprise. The entire station seemed to rumble to life â€" deep vibrations permeated the walls.

"\*\*Activating artificial gravity in 3, 2, 1â€|"\*\*

The entire group lurched in surprise as gravity returned to the station. "What the hell is going on!" Alenna shouted, the loud alarm drowning her voice.

"\*\*Depressurizingâ€|"\*\*

The group could here doors closing throughout the station. And then there was the unmistakable hiss of air depressurization.

"\*\*Depressurization complete. Initiating Environmental control systems" \*\*

The whole group was now incredibly spooked at the sudden fury of activity. Saren had his rifle clutched tight, his finger on the

trigger ready to shoot. Tali and Liara were huddled together on the floor near the door. Everyone else was grabbing hold of each other in a panic. \_Nice going you Bosh'tet, \_Tali thought to herself, holding onto Liara's arm.

The hallway they were in suddenly became warmer. Tali's internal temperature gauge on her suit told her that the area they were in was no longer icy cold. The temperature was now at a comfortable level for most organic beings — just 5 degrees colder than Citadel standard in fact. Her suit also told her that the area was being filled with a mixture of nitrogen and oxygen — also known as air — which is what most organic life breathed. Like with the temperature, the air content mixture was near identical to the Citadel's — with just a bit higher level of oxygen. Tali's suit automatically detected a breathable atmosphere, and her suit disengaged her oxygen supplies and began filtering the air in the station.

"\*\*Atmospheric homeostasis complete."\*\*

The alarm mercifully shut off, and the group — many of them terrified and clutching together on the floor — stared at each other in a long silence. After 15 seconds of nothing but hard breathing and shocked faces, someone finally spoke.

"What in spirit's name was that!"

Suddenly the door slid open, and the lights inside the main control room lit up.

"\*\*Welcome to the Tiara Memorial Station Main Control Bridge."\*\*

And then there was silence again, until finally it was shattered by Alenna's comms unit. "Alenna, are you there? Is everything alright?" Forbin asked in a frantic voice.

"We're fine" she replied. "Something just happened. I think the station is powering up."

"Powering up indeed. We're picking up energy readings about 20 decks below the central chamber. Must be where the station draws power."

"There's more. We now have artificial gravity. Are you picking up any element zero?" she asked.

"No! None at all. This is incredible. Artificial gravity with no eezo or centrifugal force. Astonishing!" Forbin said with glee.

"My suit's reading a breathable atmosphere as well."

"The environmental controls must have been activated. Whatever you did, good work!"

"Uh, thanks. Alright, we're going to explore the central chamber now. Alenna out."

After Alenna cut off her comms all eyes fell on Tali. Tali stepped back in embarrassment and started wringing her hand. "Um, he he. Sorry. I didn't know that would happen."

"I thought I told you not to touch anything!" Saren said venomously.  
"Your foolishness could have killed us",

"Well it didn't!" she shouted back.

"What was that voice?" Liara asked, changing the subject. "It sounded slightly synthetic."

"It must have been an automated voice recording" Mordin said. "Either that or a VI" he added hopefully â€“ the idea of studying a functioning VI almost too much to hope for.

"Well, there's only one way to find out. Let's go in" Alenna said. And on her command, the group cautiously entered the room.

The first thing that was apparent was the fact that this room wasn't swept clean of tech like the rest of the station. Computer interfaces adorned the room. Holographic images of the planet and other celestial bodies of the system were displayed high above the room in a mock solar system. Large windows at the far end allowed for a perfect view of the planet below. Everything was clean, neat looking, and organized â€“ a stark contrast to the rest of the station. There was a gentle hum piercing the air from the power supply. The room itself was comprised of two floors. They were currently on the top, on a ledge overlooking the bottom floor. There were staircases to both their left and right heading down. Standing here, you would have no idea that there was ever a catastrophic battle that ruined the place. Tali was amazed, but she was also confused. Every part of the station they had been through seemed to have been swept clean of any useful technology. If that was true than why would they leave the most important part of the station intact?

"\_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_, this is Alenna. We've found what we've been looking for. The control center is intact, and there's working computer and holographic interfaces everywhere. The room has artificial gravity and a breathable atmosphere â€“ although for safety concerns we're still using our suits. We'll explore this room further and then head back. I advise one of the science teams to get ready to set up a station here."

"Understood" Forbin replied. "And good luck."

Once Alenna cut off her comms the group descended down the stairs. After they reached the bottom floor everyone quickly froze. A few audible gasps were heard. Liara quickly figured out why. Her heart skipped a beat at what stood in the center of the room. For a split second she thought that what she was looking at was one of the bipedal creatures she saw on the photo screen. However she quickly realized that it was merely a lifelike statue of one.

She was utterly intrigued.

The statue in front of her was truly a work of art. Cast in what looked like iron-steel, the being stared off into the distance, its face looking firm and resolute â€“ as if it could take on anything the Galaxy threw at it and never falter. The strange long strands of fur reached down to the beings back, which seemed to flow majestically despite the material it was crafted in. A few stray strands swept across the beings face. It was wearing a form-fitting

sleeveless dress that reached down to the beings feet, with another piece of cloth draped over its shoulders.

It was beautiful.

"That's incredible" Alenna said.

"I wonder what the statue signifies" another said.

"Why do you think they put it here? Seem a bit of an odd place for a statue."

"Maybe the creature was famous among its own kind" Mordin said, as countless pictures and vid shots of the statue were taken.

"Look" Tali said. "There's more of that alien language written underneath it."

Liara zoomed her camera into the mysterious writing, and once again cursed the fact that she couldn't read it.

'\*\*In honor of Sif, Artificial Intelligence of Tiara. Through her actions, countless human lives were saved during the first attack of the Great War. She showed us courage. She showed us resolve. She showed us sacrifice. She showed us how to be human. We will never forget.'\*\*

"It's obvious that a lot of work was put into making this statue" Liara said. "The level of detail is simply stunning."

"Alright everyone, collect what you can before we head back. We'll take everything we find back to our ships while the science teams prepare to set up labs here" Alenna said.

The next hour was spent collecting just about every small trinket that wasn't bolted to the ground. There was a host of what looked like data-pads, as well as strange looking crystal cubes that were slotted in many computers. Tali had the inkling hunch that these cubes were perhaps data storage devices, although she wasn't sure how it was possible to store data on them. There were no wires or transistors. Just clear see through cubes. But if not data storage, then what? She spent most of her time collecting the odd trinkets and trying to determine what they were used for. Unfortunately they were instructed to not interface with the computer system until the labs were set up, much to Tali's dismay. Fiddling around with the system was the only way they were going to decipher the technology.

Liara was less interested in the technology in more so in the various odd-shaped trinkets and written material. There were plenty of white sheeted material with written words on them â€“ whole stacks of them in fact. She eagerly bagged them for future study once they deciphered the language.

Once the hour past and most of the movable objects were collected, the group head back to the shuttle â€“ which was a lot easier thanks to the light and artificial gravity. The shuttle ride was cramped thanks to all of the extra baggage â€“ not that anyone complained. Given the circumstances, they had made tremendous breakthroughs in just the first couple of hours. They now knew what one of the races looked like; had safely activated the space station; and had a host

of new technology and written language ready to be deciphered by xeno-linguistics/technological specialists. And they were just getting started. The real treasure lay in the space ships. And the one they were going to explore next just so happened to be the largest known ship ever constructed.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN\*\*\*:\*\* Quick explanation. My piece of crap laptop crashed, and it took me about three weeks to save up to buy a new computer. So now I'll be able to upload more often, although not as quickly as I used to, thanks to my new job. Anyways, terribly sorry about the extremely long wait. \*\*

\*\*(Oh and because I know this is going to come up) "If there is no gravity then why is the photo screen on the floor!" Well, that's not necessarily true. Gravity is created by the mass of an object. So technically, there is gravity on the station - it's just negligibly low. But given enough time, the drifting debris will eventually come to rest on the floor.\*\*

## 8. Chapter 8: History Repeated

UNSC Corvette \*\*Hades Gate, \*\*\_Slip-space, En route to the Epsilon Indi system

Kyle Doran hated being in slip-space for a week. But he supposed it was better than \_8 months\_ of travel that people had to endure just a few generations ago. And it was infinitely better than cryo-sleep, which was no longer necessary thanks to Trans-light engine advances courtesy of Forerunner tech. In fact, had \*\*Hades Gate \*\*\_launched from the colony of Chi Cheti IV instead of Reach, the trip would have taken just over a day. When he thought about it he supposed he should be thankful for all of the advances the human race has made since the Great War era. Still, no one liked being in slip-space for a week. Fortunately Doran had ways of occupying his mind.

"You know, I think I'm starting to get a hang of this game" Doran said with serious contemplation.

Petty Officer First Class Emily Rosa rolled her eyes. "Uh huh".

"No, I'm serious. I think I have a natural talent for Chess".

"You lostâ€|againâ€|for the 5,000th time."

"Yeah, but did you see the last game? That time it took Athena 14 moves to beat me." Doran turned his chair towards Emily. "That's a personal best!"

Rosa sighed. "Right".

"I'm telling you, one of these days I'm gonna beat her" He said as he turned his attention back to the holographic Chess board.

"Ensign Doran is improving greatly" Athena interjected.

"You see, even Athena agrees!" Athena chose not to tell Doran that that last game was in fact her simply toying with him. She wouldn't

want to crush the motivation of a crewman after all.

"Will you shut that game off already" Rosa berated him. "We're almost at Harvest. Besides, I think the captain's coming up." As if on cue Captain John Miles entered the bridge and the crew quickly stood to attention and saluted.

"At Ease. I hope everyone is well rested, we've got a big day ahead of us" Miles said before gulping down his last bit of coffee. He nodded his head in disapproval. "It's like I'm drinking liquid horse shit."

"Sorry to hear that sir" Doran responded. "We saved some of the sugar packets in our MRE that we didn't use so you could sweeten your coffee. I left it near the coffee dispenser in the mess room. Did it improve the taste?"

"Sure did. Now it tastes like liquid horse shit with sugar. Thanks for the gesture though." The crew chuckled, which Miles liked to see. On monotonously boring missions like this it was important to keep the crews spirits up. He had seen firsthand what happens when tensions and frustrations are combined with cramped living conditions. Because of this, Miles aloud an unusual bit of leniency among his crew. And as any soldier knows, nothing relieves stress like humor. That didn't mean however that his ship operations were any less effective. Miles always commanded his ship with the crisp military efficiency that was the hallmark of the UNSC.

"Good morning Captain." Athena materialized in the holoprojector. "We'll be entering the Epsilon Indi system soon. All ship systems are reading normal and we'll be exiting slip-space in just over a minute."

"Good, I trust that standard procedures have been followed?"

"Yes sir" Ensign Duran reported. "Our energy shields are powered up and reading 100%. All Shiva Nuclear Warheads and Archer Missiles are primed and ready to fire. The Plasma Torpedoes are fully charged, and the Pulse Laser Turrets are online and active." Miles nodded his head. Ever since the Great War the UNSC spared no expense in protection. All UNSC vessels had to be fully prepared and ready for any potential combat scenario at any time. It was standard procedure to be armed and ready for battle when exiting slip-space.

"Prepare for slip-space exit protocols. We'll be exiting right in orbit around Harvest correct?"

"Aye sir" Rosa answered. Thanks to the UNSC's vastly upgraded slip-space engines not only could they travel 100's of times faster, but could also make precision jumps that was simply impossible decades prior. Now the UNSC was no longer restricted to exiting slip-space near the outer edges of a solar system for safety hazards. Miles had learned early on just how much of a disadvantage humanity had compared to the Covenant. Not only did the Covenant have thousands of years of advancement ahead of the human race, but they also had a wealth of ancient alien technology to reverse engineer. To put things in perspective, the old Shaw-Fujikawa Translight Engines could typically travel about 2 to 3 light-years a day, or 5 light-years for top-of-the-line military ships. In comparison, the Covenant ships could travel more than 900 light-years a day. And even

\_that\_ was insignificant to Forerunner engines, which based on research and salvaged technology scientists believe could travel over \_2,000\_ light-years in the same time. He knew that the Covenant once had a Forerunner Keyship in their possession. The San' Shyuum had used it to conquer the Sangheili and induct them into their hierarch. Miles always gave a silent prayer of thanks the Covenant had decided to disarm the ship and use it to power the space station High Charity. Had that force been waged on humanity during the warâ€!

He didn't want to think about it.

"Exiting slip-space in 15 seconds" Doran said, snapping Miles out of his wandering mind.

"Good. As soon as we exit slip-space dock with Tiara station."

"Aye sir. All systems check green, exiting in 5, 4, 3, 2, 1â€!"

A large rupture pierced through the empty void 4,000 kilometers away from Harvest, opening a physics defying portal between the normal dimension and the slip-stream plane. \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_ entered out of the seemingly nothingness of space, fully clearing the dimensional bridge before the portal collapsed.

"Alright, bring us in towarâ€!"

"Captain!" Athena said frantically. "We have unknown signatures in the vicinity!"

\* \* \*

><p><strong> 0.221 Seconds after slip-space re-entry<strong>

Being an AI had its advantages. With the ability to sift through monumental amounts of data in a blink of an eye - to make trillions of calculations a second - time was, for lack of a better word, an illusion. As soon as the portal opened, before the ship even finished its entry into normal space, Athena knew something was wrong. Immediately she pushed all of her processing power to overdrive, and utilized every scanner and sensor on the ship.

The first thing that was apparent was that the ship's gravitational sensors were off the charts, particularly around the fifth planet of the system. Whatever was causing this was not natural. Along with the massive gravitational distortion, there were other similar gravity signatures as well. Six large ones, and a slew of smaller ones, all registering in orbit above Harvest. Based on the size of these distortions they had to be ships of some kind.

She brought the ship's infrared, LADAR, thermal, electromagnetic, and slipstream sensors to bear on the unknown objects, and a flood of data returned to her. Yes, these were indeed ships. She ran the ship designs and thermal signatures through every known model in her databanks - no known match. They looked aerodynamic in design - as if the ships would be more suited to atmospheric flight than space travel. The largest ship was 980 meters in length - just slightly smaller than the old Marathon Class Cruisers. Triangular in shape with sharp edges and wings jutting out on both sides, one word came to Athena's mind - Predator. Whatever they were, they definitely were not human, nor were they anything that matched the designs of any

known alien culture in the galaxy. Plus, the ships were giving off \_way\_ to much gravitational signatures for their size. Another, more distressing thing to note; these ships clearly had spinal cannons and mounted weaponry - and were in an obvious military defensive positioning. And to add on top of things, she was picking up plenty of radio signatures - with voices speaking in an incomprehensible language.

\_Alien voices\_.

Again, Athena ran everything she could pick up through her language databanks. And again, the same result came up - no known match. All of these things pointed to one overwhelming fact.

This was a First Contact scenario. And by the looks of the war ships, it seemed like the worst kind. Could this be the beginning of a second great war? At Harvest no less?

**\*\*0.619 Seconds after slip-space entry\*\***

While a part of Athena's consciousness checked and re-checked **\*\*Hades Gate's\*\*** defensive and offensive systems, she continued to analyze everything she could. The slew of smaller vessels Athena picked up were a lot different than the 6 larger ships - looking more along the lines of cargo freighters. They definitely were not military vessels, that much was obvious. These ships were scattered throughout the debris field - some drifting near the remains of old Covenant and human shattered ships while others surrounded the Tiara space elevator.

\_What are they doing? Gathering information? Collecting technology?\_

This definitely was \_not\_ good. The UNSC has standing orders to prevent any and all technological edges from falling into enemy hands. Fortunately most of the debris field had been stripped empty of any useful technology long ago, while what remained was considered 'not vital' to UNSC security - mainly tech that was so common and understood by both the UNSC and former Covenant species that it didn't matter if it fell into enemy hands. For example a ship's anti-gravitational drives. Both the UNSC and former Covenant use gravity emitters to convert energy into graviton particles and direct them in a way to generate gravity without mass. Negative-gravitons would lessen gravity and create lift, while positive-gravitons would create a repulsive effect, thus giving a ship or station gravity. There was no point in safeguarding such basically understood technology.

\_But what about these beings? Did they understand this technology? Could they negate any technological edge humanity has in potential conflicts by analyzing these ruins?\_

**\*\*1.252 Seconds after slip-space re-entry\*\***

As a UNSC AI it was Athena's duty to protect humanity from any and all threats posed to it - and large, unknown alien military ships rummaging through debris fields was a significant threat. She checked and re-checked her protocols for the situation at hand. **\*\*Hades Gate\*\*** had standing orders to destroy any unauthorized ship entering the Epsilon Indi system. On the other hand, there were clear cut

procedures for first contact scenarios. After the disastrous first contact last time - ironically in the same system - High Command wanted to ensure that such a thing never happens again.

Going into battle would almost certainly be suicide. For one there were too many unknowns about the ships offensive and defensive capabilities. These beings could have weapons that the UNSC has never encountered before and have no way of defending against. Humanity learned the hard way what that was like with the Covenant's Plasma Cannons. And two, \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_ was outnumbered and outgunned. The Prowler Class Stealth Corvettes were never designed for heavy combat. They were mostly used for information gathering and fleet support. At 162 meters, \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_ is extremely fast, incredibly nimble, and has active stealth capabilities - both from sensors and visual light-bending camouflage - plus a variety of offensive and defensive weapons; all of which made the Prowler Class ship a dangerous opponent. But fighting alone? Against 6 other combat crafts, at least 3 of which appeared to be heavy combat vessels? Athena didn't like those odds. Prowlers didn't even have spinal mounted main cannons.

No, attempting to remove these ships by force right now was not an option. Besides, protocol dictated that the First Contact scenario be followed to the letter. Athena just hoped that history wouldn't be repeated all over again. Her creators have suffered enough already.

\*\*1.836 Seconds after slip-space re-entry\*\*

\_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_ fully re-entered into normal space, and the slip-space portal collapsed.

"Captain, we have unknown signatures in the vicinity!"

## 9. Chapter 9: History Repeated part 2

UNSC Corvette \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*, \*\*\_Epsilon Indi system

"Unknown contacts?" Miles said with shock.

"There are six combat craft in orbit over Harvest" Athena said, displaying the images on the holoprojector. "One of them based on size must be a light Cruiser."

"Dammit. All hands to battle stations. Doran, activate Stealth systems"

"Aye sir!" The crew of Hades Gate went into frantic action, although not without explicit coordination and purpose - a quality produced from years of training and engagement fights. In seconds Ensign Duran had the ships stealth systems online and active. Athena coordinated the ships weapon systems, already acquiring targeting solutions with the Plasma Torpedoes and missiles. On the holoprojector the combat ships appeared in red and were labeled 'Hostile 1-6', with Hostile 1 being designated as a flagship - while the rest of the unknown ships were marked in yellow.

"Stealth systems are engaged." Doran reported. "We're now invisible to both sensors and visual detection."

"Captain, I've got something here" Rosa said.

"What is it?" Miles asked

"We were spotted before we entered stealth mode. Our ship was pinged several times with a language our systems couldn't translate. We're incognito now, butâ€|"

"But they know we're here" Miles finished, aware that any decent shipboard sensors would have picked them up as soon as they re-entered normal space. He silently cursed himself for not engaging stealth systems before exiting slip-space. But...he had no reason to believe there would be ships here, as the system's slip-space sensors would have picked up any slip-space entry within 10 light-years of Epsilon Indi. So either HIGHCOM seriously dropped the ballâ€|or these ships somehow made it here without detection. Speaking of these shipsâ€|"

Captain Miles had spent his whole career studying the ships, strategies and tactics of other species, and had a slew of battle victories in his hey-days to prove it. With extensive knowledge about the ships and tactics of every known alien faction; from ships sizes to offensive/defensive capabilities, and everything in between, Miles had become known as somewhat of a tactical whiz within the UNSC. He knew, for example, that Brute ships were heavily armed to the teeth, but were lacking in defensive measures. When going one on one, it was better to keep distance and attempt to strike the vulnerable hulls than do a head on assault - as the Jiralhanae were adamant in launching every single onboard weapon at once in the first volley of an engagement. If you were patient and kept your distance, you could avoid the onslaught and then strike and destroy the defenseless ship with ease. The Kig-Yar were different - preferring a large amount of small, quick, and highly maneuverable ships to heavy fire-power. While one ship wasn't much of a threat, a whole swarm of them could at times overwhelm even the best of defenders. Battles with them were mostly long engagement fights - as Kig-Yar Shipmasters choose to keep distance so their ships could easily dodge the superior fire-power of their opponents. Getting a bead on them was difficult, and if you weren't careful they could flank your position and overwhelm your defenses. This strategy proved extremely effective when raiding lightly defended colonies and merchant ships, as humanity had learned the hard way.

But the ships he was looking at right now were like nothing he had never seen before. Not human, and definitely not former-covenant. They looked more like conventional aircraft than space vessels - although on a much larger scale. One thing was immediately apparent though - they were definitely designed for fighting. That much he could tell just by one glimpse at them.

"Doran, status report" he ordered.

"Everything on our end operating 100%. Our shields are fully powered; targeting solutions are locked - Plasma Torpedoes and Pulse Lasers are charged and ready to fire. Archer missiles and Shiva warheads ready to launch on command. Our stealth systems are engaged."

"And what of their response?" Miles asked. "Can they detect us?"

It was Athena who spoke. "Along with the massive amounts of pings we've received before we enacted our stealth systems, two ships are heading in our general direction." The holo showed two ships - designated as 'Hostile 4 and 5' - were indeed heading their way. Both were identical in design and size - reading to be 141 meters in length. "But by their trajectory and lack of pings they don't seem to know where we are. It's doubtful they can detect us. But they're certainly looking for us."

"And just who are 'they'? Athena, what are we dealing with? These don't look like any ships I've ever seen before."

"Captain, these vessels don't match any known ship design on database, and their gravity signatures are off the charts. Not only can I not match any of the transmissions I've picked up to any known language, but the voices themselves don't match the range of any known species."

Everyone turned their attention to Athena, shocked at what she was inferring. Inwardly, Miles gut wrenched, outwardly he showed no signs of distress. "Athena, are you saying what I think you're saying?"

Athena held the Captain's gaze for a full 3 seconds - an eternity for an AI - before shaking her head and answering. "Based on the empirical evidence, I can only deduce one logical conclusion. We are dealing with a species we have yet to encounter."

The room was silent, save for the gentle hum of the computers. Even the navigators who were moving the ship away from the two searching vessels stopped what they were doing, at which point Athena's subroutines took over.

For the first time in a very long time, Miles was truly at a loss for words. The weight of Athena's revelation hit him in the gut with all the force of a sledge hammer.

Thisâ€|this could not be happening. Not again. Not here.

Was this to be our fate? Is humanity destined to suffer and fight for all eternity until we are finally swept away in the cosmic winds?

"Athena" Miles said in a low voice - almost a whisper. "What are they doing? Are they hostile?"

"Based on the sensor scans and positioning of ships, it appears that these vessels" - she highlighted the yellow marked ships on the holo - "are scavenging through the debris field."

Anger mixed with the bile in his gut. The idea of aliens stealing debris and rummaging through the sacred space of Harvest disturbed him. Are they trying to learn our secrets? Find our weaknesses?

What are they doing? What do they want?

Why can't humanity just be left alone?

Athena continued. "The six combat ships range from small vessels; 141

meters in length, perhaps fighters of some kind - to three spinal mounted ships; two of which are 552 meters and one just shy of a kilometer. Although it should represent significant fire-power - at least by our standards - it is not overwhelming. It is more likely that they are here for security than invasion."

Miles sighed. \*\*Hades Gate\*\* was now a good distance away from the two dispatched ships looking for them. That proved that the alien's sensors weren't more advanced than the UNSC's. A comforting sign, but felt moot under the circumstances.

"So you're telling me we have an unknown force rummaging through our technology and ruins with military grade ships providing security?" Miles shook his head. "Well that just makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside."

"As for their intentions" Athena said, "I do not have enough data to speculate further. I cannot tell you, for example, if they are hostile, or if they are just here for scientific curiosity."

"Scientific curiosity?" Miles looked at Athena like her avatar just sprouted another head.

"Captain, this could be anything - from an imminent invasion to simple research. Perhaps they stumbled upon these ruins, and are simply trying to study them. Based on my knowledge of human history, it is likely we would do the same."

Hmm, that wasâ€¦interesting. Athena was right. If humans found a giant debris field of unknown ships, wouldn't they start scouring through the wreckage?

\_Of course we would. Perhapsâ€¦they're not hostile. Maybe they just found this place and are studying it.\_

Miles could only hope that was the case. That perhaps this wasn't the precursor to an invading fleet. Maybe, there could be peace with these beings.

\_But then why bring all of this military force? Wouldn't these beings know that would be considered a hostile act? Look at what happened the last time aliens showed up at Harvest.\_

\_What if they're just like the covenant?\_

"There'sâ€¦something else Captain" Athena said. One look at the AI and Miles \_knew \_he wasn't going to like what he was about to hear.

"The moon orbiting the fifth planetâ€¦it's gone."

"Gone, what do you mean gone?" he asked, shocked.

"Captain" Rosa said. She brought the scans up on the holo. "Athena's right. Scans show that the entire ice moon is broken off into chunks andâ€¦what the hell is \_that\_?"

On the holoprojector, amid the floating remnants of the ice-moon, appeared to be a massive construct the likes of which Miles had never

seen before. It was large - 5.1 kilometers in length - and very closely resembled the shape of a tuning fork. There was also what he could only describe as being a very large rotating 'gyroscope' of sorts spinning within the object.

"Athena" Miles said - voice grave. "What the hell is that thing?"

"Preliminary scans show that the object is made of unknown material" she answered.

"What's that glowing energy inside those spinning rings?" he asked.

"I do not know. It doesn't match any substance known to man."

"Is it a ship?"

"Unlikely. The object is in an orbital lock with the planet and I'm picking up no signals from it. In fact I'm picking up nothing at all except for an extreme amount of gravitational variance. An object of that size should not be doing that, unless it is specifically designed to manipulate or alter mass."

\_Manipulate mass? That definitely didn't sound good. It is obvious thisâ€|thing was responsible for the destruction of the moon. Was this some kind of hyper advanced weapon? \_

Images of the Halo Array flooded his mind, sending shivers down his spine. "Athena, is this a weapon?"

"I have no data as to its function or purpose."

Miles sighed. "Doran, give me an update on the unknown ships."

"Aye Sir." The ships appeared on the holo. "The two vessels that were searching for us have returned and rejoined with the rest of the ships. The combat ships have now grouped together in an obvious defensive position - while the non-combat crafts are leaving the ruins and rallying behind the six warships - for safety reasons obviously. It seems our initial entry must have spooked them. Everything is still operating at 100% efficiency on our side and we've sent a flash FTL transmission to HIGHCOM. Sir, what are your orders?"

Miles didn't say anything, but continued to contemplate the situation in silence. If these beings were interested in peace, then why bring warships here? And what about that massive construct? Whatever it was, it was responsible for destroying an entire moon. Why would peaceful beings do that?

\_Because they're not peaceful.\_

This situation just kept going from bleak to bleaker the more he analyzed it.

Ensign Doran turned in his chair to face Miles and Athena. "Captain, what about their cyber defenses? Couldn't Athena attempt to hack their systems? Wouldn't that help us figure out what we're dealing with?"

"While I would like nothing more than to test my cyber warfare abilities on these ships, there are two major problems preventing me from doing so" Athena answered. "First, if I attempt to hack their systems we'll give away our location. And second, as per First Contact protocol, I am forbidden to attempt hacking as it may be seenâ€|"

"As an act of hostility" Miles finished. He was well aware of the First Contact protocols - it was mandatory knowledge for every captain of the UNSC.

Ensign Duran clearly didn't like that answer. He stood up and faced the Captain. "With respect Sir, scavenging our ruins, bringing warships into our system, and destroying one of our moons is 'an act of hostility'."

"Ensign, calm yourself!" Miles said. "You are an officer of the UNSC. Act like it. We're going to follow the First Contact protocol. Is that understood?"

"But Sirâ€|"

"I know how you're feeling Duran" Miles interrupted him. He turned his attention to the entire crew - the looks of nervousness and uncertainty evident in their faces. "I know how all of you are feeling. Believe me, I do." All eyes were on the captain. "But there is so much we don't know right now. I will not be responsible for starting a war. And neither will my crew. Is that understood?"

"Iâ€|yes Sir. Sorry Sir."

"Now if war is what these beings want" Miles continued, "then we will be ready for them. We will meet them where they seek battle. We will fight them in the unforgiving darkness of space. We will charge them in the trenches of terrestrial worlds. We will shed our blood, sweat, and tears in defense of our homes and of our brothers and sisters. We will \*fight \*for Earth. And we will do so with all the strength and passion and courage we can muster. And we \*will\* defeat them, just like we defeated the Covenant. \*\*Is\*\* \*that understood\*\*?"

This time the whole crew answered in unison. "Yes Sir!"

"Good. I need everyone focused. This may very well be the defining moments of our lives. I do not know what the future will hold. I do not know if these beings seek peace or war. But I do know this - we all took the solemn oath to protect humanity; and it is times like these when those oaths are most severely tested. But I have faith in you. And I know that whatever happens - in peace and in war - I will always be proud to call you my crew, my shipmates, and my friends."

Rosa stood up. "And we couldn't have a better Captain."

"Hoorah!" The rest of the crew echoed.

Miles smiled. A surge of pride swept through him.

\_Wars come and go, but my soldiers stay eternal.\_

Miles closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. \_Whatever this crazy universe has in store for us, whatever challenge we face, my crew and I will be ready for it\_. He exhaled, letting all of his fears, uncertainties, and doubts flow out. He opened his eyes.

"Athena. De-cloak the ship. And send the First Contact package."

"Aye Sir."

\_And hope this doesn't turn into another war.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Hmm, I wonder what's going to happen next?\*\*

\*\*Also, how's this playing out through the eyes of the citadel races? Stay tuned.\*\*

\*\*p.s. Yeah, I quoted 2pac. But it just fit so well...\*\*

## 10. Chapter 10: Precipice

On board the Council exploration vessel \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_

"Damn!" Tali exclaimed, once again upset with her inability to interact with the crystal cubes or the data pad interfaces. It had been a full day since Alenna's expedition team returned from the space elevator, during which the researchers spent frivolous hours attempting to decipher the alien tech.

"Are you sure those are even what you think they are?" A Salarian researcher asked Tali.

Tali gave him a look that shut him up instantly. Yes, she knew these crystal cubes were data storages of some kind. Although they appeared to be completely clear, upon examination on a microscopic level revealed billions - perhaps \_trillions\_ - of complex circuitry lines and micro transistor. In reality, it didn't much differ from standard galactic storage chips, with the obvious difference that it was \_incomprehensively small.\_

But it wasn't until they 'inserted' the data cubes into the slots of the salvaged alien computers that they started making real headway. Early on it was evident that there was no way of lifting the data off the cubes with their own computers. There was simply nowhere to connect the circuitry and no way of knowing how. This was not an unexpected occurrence. It was the same problem the galaxy faced with Prothean tech and data storage discs. Even after thousands of years of study, the citadel races still knew very little about how to extricate the data without permanently damaging it. It wasn't so much as the Prothean computer tech being more advanced - but instead simply being so alien in design and method. Fortunately, whereas the existence of working Prothean computer tech was extremely rare - and with what did exist having 50,000 years of damage and decay - they had a treasure trove of working, undamaged computer systems to decipher.

One very startling fact that emerged from these crystals was that the micro-circuitry wasn't static, but instead reacted to outside stimuli, morphing into different outlines. That was certainly interesting, and completely unexpected. Every time Tali or the other tech specialist attempted to interact with the cubes using the salvaged alien data pads - as their own computers were simply incompatible - the cubes micro-circuitry altered its formation and created wildly different, and constantly shifting, circuit patterns. While the other researchers found this interesting, but nothing to get over-excited about (especially with the prospect of non-mass effect FTL and gravity, for which she could hardly blame them), Tali found this incredibly fascinating - and very unsettling. The idea of alternating storage capacitors that could shift and adapt to new data was not unknown to her - and certainly not unknown to the Quarian people. During the golden age of Quarian society, their top scientists were in fact developing and experimenting with computer systems with a similar function - with the intent of upgrading the Geth VI software to make the system more adaptable. The idea was that if Geth programs could adapt and react to different situations outside of their pre-scripted written protocols, then they could perform a wider function of uses.

And it worked. It worked beyond what the Quarian people could have imagined. That Keelah accursed upgrade is widely considered to be the precursor of the Geth revolts; the upgrade that allowed the Geth to improve their own programming without organics - the upgrade that prevented the Geth from being shut down or hacked for more than a few seconds - the upgrade that changed the Geth software from a virtual intelligence into an artificial intelligence.

That is why these data crystals became the focal point of Tali's attention. Thisâ€¦this could really help her people against the Geth. The crystals before her seemed even more advanced than the entangled web of the Geth network. Even the Geth processes near impossibly fast cyber defenses weren't this reactive. If you were good enough - or maybe just lucky - you could hack a platform for a while before the Geth's reactive systems could adapt to the foreign virus and over-write it. But the reactive nature of these crystals made the Geth network seem tame in comparison. Tali had utilized every bit of her technological skills and computer knowledge to extricate the data from the cubes - writing some of the most malicious, intrusive programs she could muster. And it all ended with the same result: Failure.

No matter how hard she tried, no matter how many cleverly written algorithms and backdoor-entry attempts, the crystal cubes would simply react faster. Not only that, but the more she tried, the quicker she was shutout. The data crystal's programming was learning and adapting to her hacking attempts, in a way that not even the Geth could do. The implication of such computer technology was not lost to her.

If her people could reverse-engineer the matrixes of these data crystals, if they could create programs that could hack into Geth software - and maintain control by adapting to the Geth's own cyber-defensesâ€¦

\_Keelah, this could be the key to taking back our homeworld.\_ \_It could allow us to control the Geth.\_

Perhaps she was being a bit optimistic. It had only been a mere day of research after all. And what little data that could be ascertained from the crystals only created more questions than answers. But Tali was no amateur. She could see the potential of programs and software that could be created by using the shifting micro-circuitry. This kind of technology had created the Geth - and that was an extremely rudimentary version of what she was studying now. These data crystals were more advanced in every way. The sheer complexity - but also the simplicity - was more advanced than anything she had ever seen. Yes, without a doubt, these beings had a firmer grasp on computer tech than the rest of the galaxy. That was something Tali came to understand very quickly. If she was right about the alien tech being as reactive and responsive as she believed, and if the amount of data capacity that the tech team estimated was accurate (an ability to hold over a billion terabytes of data), then what she was holding in the palm of her hand potentially had the processing power of some of the galaxy's most advanced super-computers.

And this is just one technological leap that could be made from these ruins. Without a doubt, if these beings really could travel without the mass effect, then that would change the galaxy beyond comprehension.

"You've been busy I see." Tali turned to the familiar voice of the Asari Liara T'Soni, the one person she could come to call a friend outside the Flotilla.

"Oh, hey Liara, how are you?"

"I'm doing great. We're already making progress on the basic anatomy of the species that once occupied this planet. It's just basic things through indirect evidence, mostly from the space elevator and photo screen we've recovered, but it's more than I thought we'd make in such a short time" she said with barely hidden excitement.

"Like what basic stuff?" Although Tali's interests lie more in the technology than in the species themselves, she was still very curious.

"Well we knew that they breathed a nitrogen-oxygen atmosphere like most species based on the planet. However as the planet was not their homeworld we also knew it was not specifically suited for their biology. But with the atmosphere in the station activated, it appears that their exact preferred content ratio is 78% nitrogen and 21% oxygen. This would explain why the ruined city is located in one of the lowest depressions of the planet, as its low altitude would provide more oxygen for a planet with far less than what is comfortable for them. The exact nitrogen-oxygen content ratio is very interesting."

"Why?" Tali asked, not really sure why the species' preferred atmospheric condition should be so interesting.

Liara didn't miss a beat before answering. "Because, there is only one other planet in the galaxy that has that exact same atmospheric content ratioâ€”Thessia."

"Really? Wow, that is interesting. It seems you have more in common with this species than just appearances."

"That's something I'm not sure I find exciting or unsettling. The bone structure of this species - at least of what we can see in the photo - is astonishingly similar to that of an Asari. From the symmetry of the skull and body shape, to the body size and composition. They even have five digit hands like us - in the exact shape and structure as ours. Even the Batarian's five digit hands have different bone structure and movements. The comparison between this species and us in aesthetic appearances is freakishly close."

Tali chuckled. "So, are you Asari absolutely sure you don't have inter-galactic space cousins!"

Liara sighed. "Yes, for the hundredth time, we do not have 'intergalactic space cousin's we never told you about'" she said with mock annoyance.

"I'm sorry Liara" Tali said with a grin, "but paint these people blue and give 'em scalp crests and you got yourself an Asari."

Liara laughed. "Maybe you're right. But in my opinion it's just an extreme case of biology developing in similar patterns. It's not an accident that most space faring species walk on two legs and have opposable thumbs. Those two qualities not only give a species an advantage in survival, but also in tool making - which leads to intelligence."

Tali crossed her arms in indifference. "I still say inter-galactic space cousins."

Liara rolled her eyes, although clearly more amused than annoyed. She decided now was a good time to change the subject. "You've been cooped up in this lab since we got back. You should get some rest. When's the last time you slept?"

"I'm fine Liara. Really. These data crystalâ€!"

"Will be here after you've taken a break" she finished. "We'll be heading out to the Leviathan ship in 6 hours. You don't want to explore the largest ship in history half-asleep do you?"

Tali sighed. Liara was right. Working herself to death wasn't going to help the mission. She needed a clear mind to perform her tasks. "I suppose you're right. I can get a few hours of sleep!"

The intercom of the \*\*Seloria \*\*suddenly blared life, startling both Tali and Liara into a jump. A Salarian spoke over the comms.

"Alert! An unknown ship has entered the system. All crew report to your prospective stations. Captain Alenna, you are needed in the CIC!"

Both Liara and Tali locked eyes in a confused and startled look, and then dashed towards the CIC in a sprint.

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the Turian dreadnaught <em><strong>Majestic

Spirits<strong>\_

"What do you mean it just disappeared?" the General asked, rather annoyed.

"Our sensors aren't picking up anything. No visuals either" a sensor operator reported.

General Fealix was not someone who liked being kept in the dark. Unfortunately, with the way the current situation has been developing he might as well have been blindfolded. It was just under a minute ago that an unknown ship had mysteriously appeared on the ships sensors 4,000 kilometers away from the planet. There was no warning. No FTL signature. It justâ€|appeared out of the emptiness of space. Immediately the \_\*\*Majestic Spirit\*\*\_ and a half dozen other research vessels that picked up the same thing transmitted standard IFF transmissions - without success. And then as quickly as it seemed to pop into existence, it vanished - without a trace. It didn't leave the system via FTL. It just vanished. \_\*\*Majestic Spirit's\*\*\_ considerable sensor's picked up nothing. Not even a visual. Whoever was on that mysterious ship either didn't understand the transmissions or choose not to respond. Given the situation at hand, and just by the look of that ship, Fealix knew that it was the former. In all his years of service he had pretty much seen it all. From protecting border colonies from Terminus raids to hunting down slavers and pirates, he had encountered just about every ship the galaxy had to offer. The ship that the \_\*\*Majestic Spirit's\*\*\_ sensors were able to get a brief glimpse of didn't remotely resemble any known ship design. Not the smooth, almost artistic look of the Asari. Not the nimble, fast-striking ships of the Salarians. Not the powerful juggernauts of the Hierarchy.

Not the flat, utilitarian design of Volus merchant ships. Not the aquatic looking Hanar ships. Not the spacious ships of the Elcor. Not the myriad, jury-rigged ships of the Quarion Flotilla. Not Batarian. Not Terminus.

The mysterious ship that was displayed on the CIC main screen was a frigate sized vessel, measuring at 162 meters in length. It was completely black, and very much resembled a large, swooping predatorial bird - with curved, wing-like extensions sweeping downwards. It had no noticeable cannon of any sort, although he doubted that meant it was unarmed. This thing was designed for combat. That much was obvious. General Fealix had always had a gift for ascertaining the strengths and weaknesses of a ship, or 'reading its spirit' as he called it. More often than not his instincts proved correct. And what his instincts were telling him was that this ship was dangerous. The image of a predator silently stalking through the night, ready to pounce on its unsuspecting prey kept creeping into his mind. The ship held the same demeanor as the ruined field of debris. Imposing. Impenetrable. Unyielding. Deadly. Something you wouldn't want to upset.\_

From the moment the ship appeared in the system, he knew it was from the same species that once inhabited this planet. What his sensor analyst said next all but confirmed it.

"Sir, one of the research vessels got a visual of the ship's left hull side before it disappeared." He brought the image up on the main screen. Clearly visible was the strange alien writing that adorned

most of the ruined ships.

\*\*UNSC HADES GATE\*\*

He knew that contact with this species was inevitable the moment he was informed of his new task. The council and top politicians had tried to convince him that it was likely these beings must have destroyed themselves - that they probably went extinct like the Protheans or Rachni. At first Fealix found this amusing, but came to only view them as incompetent, if not desperate. He wondered how an intelligent person could delude themselves enough to accept insane conclusions with little or no evidence. There was absolutely no reason to believe these beings no longer lived. But these foolish politicians would refuse to accept obvious truths if it in anyway didn't fit into the perfect little universe they created for themselves - mainly, a universe where they were at the top and nothing threatened their power. But if these beings did still exist - and Fealix knew they did - then that threatened them, because it would mean they may no longer be the kings of the galaxy; that perhaps they were no longer the most advanced or most powerful. So they did what any self-serving politician did - they denied the issue instead of facing it.

Well, almost all did. Just before Fealix was about to depart the council chambers, the Asari representative - Councilor Tevos - asked him to join her in her office privately. He remembered that conversation clearly.

"\_General Fealix, thank you for meeting with me. What I'm about to discuss with you is important." She gestured to a guest chair.  
"Please, take a seat."\_

\_Fealix did as he was asked, nodding his head in respect, as was typical with Asari culture. "Of course Councilor. Though if I may ask, what could be so important that you wish to speak with me privately?"\_

"\_General, you have expressed great skepticism that we are dealing with an extinct race, is that correct?" She asked in her serenely calm voice. The councilor's demeanor was not one of accusation or judgment, but of understanding. He felt he could be completely honest with her without worry of backlash or having his concerns immediately shut down. Whether that was because he felt she was the one sensible person on the council or if he was being fooled by her impressive diplomatic skills, he didn't know - or care. He was tired of being told to 'keep his views to himself' by politicians who refused to listen to reason.\_

"\_Councilor, with respect, it is foolish to think that these beings are extinct. There is no reason to make us incline to believe so. All we have is one devastated planet and a destroyed ship yard. How many planets did the Rachni render uninhabitable during their invasions? How many planets did the Krogan bombard during the Rebellions? Yet we are here are we not? If the CEC conclusion that there may have been two different species at war is correct, then doesn't that mean that at least one is still around? Even if the victorious species hunted the other to extinction, why would both suddenly disappear? We don't know anything about these beings except that at some point roughly 70 years ago they fought in a battle. It could have been a war. It could have been a skirmish. It could be anything! Jumping to conclusions

like this is not only naive, but in my opinion completely idiotic!" He blurted out, raising his voice beyond normal conversational tone. It was then that he realized what a fool he must have looked like, losing his temper in the presence of the highest representative of a species. To her credit Tevos didn't seem upset by his outburst, but still held onto that same cool serenity that came with hundreds of years of diplomatic negotiations. Fealix quickly regained his composure. "I apologize for my outburst Councilor, but I feel that we are jumping into this situation blindly. I don't want to have another Rachni war on our hands." \_

\_Tevos waited patiently for General Fealix to finish, before finally speaking. "I understand General, and I completely agree with you." \_

\_Fealix's mandibles twitched in surprise. "You what?" \_

"\_Unlike my fellow councilors, I do not believe that these beings no longer exist. Councilor Milos has convinced himself that there are no potential threats beyond Relay 314. Salarians have always operated on the idea that any conflict should be won before it begins. They use their superior intelligence services to strike down threats before they can arise. But if these beings have developed completely different tech not based on element zero, then they would have no way of knowing how to counter it. And that, General, scares them." \_

\_That wasn't what Fealix expected to hear. "But councilor, Milos is one of the best of his species. It's why he was selected to be representative of his race. Would the Councilor really delude himself like that? Out of fear no less?" \_

"General" Tevos answered, "If there is one thing I have learned through all my years of diplomacy, it's that no matter how much power one attains, they are still flawed organics. Even the Councilors. Even me." \_

\_Fealix was starting to develop a new found respect for councilor Tevos. It was no wonder she was the chosen representative of her people. Most politicians couldn't recognize their flaws if their lives depended on it. \_

\_Councilor Tevos continued. "As for Councilor Valern, he will always be a soldier in spirit. He doesn't much care if they're still around or not. He just wants to ensure that if they are, then the Hierarchy has an undisputed edge. Unfortunately, he seems to be willing to do anything to gain that edge, even if it means conflict with these beings." \_

"\_Councilor, if I can speak plainly, I do not believe inserting a dreadnaught into the system is wise. It would make far more sense to station my patrol outside of Relay 314. In doing so we could prevent any pirates, mercenaries, or just any curious ship from entering the Relay. That way, if these beings do show up, they won't feel provoked by finding warships in their system. And if they do start firing without provocation, then my patrol fleet is literally seconds away from passing through the relay to provide cover-fire so the research vessels can escape. In my opinion it's the best way to prevent conflict." \_

\_Councilor Tevos smiled. "You possess the wisdom of an Asari Matriarch General Fealix. I argued the same point. But in the end, Relay 314 is on the outer edge of Turian space, and the Hierarchy holds the decisions of their military. Not I." \_

\_At this point Fealix had to ask. "Councilor, what's your position?" \_

"\_I do not want conflict with these beings General, especially if it could be avoided so easily. But I also cannot allow ground breaking technology to just sit at our door steps undisturbed." \_

\_Fealix got the distinct impression that he was about to find out why was here. "Councilor, not to sound rude, but why did you summon me here?" \_

"\_Because my influence has reached its limits. If left up to Valern he would have half the Hierarchy's military stationed in the Tyrogg system. And Milos is willing to go along with him so long as the Salarians can reap the benefits of the technology. I've convinced Valern to insert just a token security force instead, which given his stubbornness was actually quite an accomplishment." She tapped a few commands on her omni-tool. "With the current situation as it is, my people felt it necessary to prepare for eventual contact." \_

\_Fealix's own omni-tool chimed, indicating he received a message. He opened it up to find a large file entitled \_\_\*\*Tyrogg Contact Scenario\*\*\_\_. "Councilor, what is this?" \_

"\_It's a contact message. Mostly images of the various species of the galaxy living in harmony. It's designed to be as non-threatening as possible. Basically, it's a way to say we have peaceful intentions. General, if you do come into contact with these beings, I want you to transmit this message." \_

\_Fealix was skimming through the images of the message. They were basic diagrams of different species, along with special greetings and images of different races working together. He nodded his head towards Tevos. "I will Councilor." \_

"\_There is one more thing. I have discussed this with Captain Alenna T'Velos" \_

"\_The head of the research team?" Fealix asked.\_

"\_Yes" Tevos answered. "As you know, we Asari have the unique ability to combine our consciousness with other species. In this way we can learn the language of other race's very quickly through mind melding. If you make successful contact, Alenna will be prepared to join consciousness with a member of their species so we can learn their language." \_

\_Fealix nodded in understanding. Asari mind-melding was how the races of the galaxy were able to communicate quickly upon first contact. What would have taken months - years - of language barriers to chop through only took days when the council met new civilizations. "I will do all that you ask Councilor." \_

Fealix sighed. Well, he would transmit the contact message to that

ship if he knew where in spirit's name it was.

"General, orders?" his XO asked.

"Recall all of the research vessels into defensive positions. And send the frigates \_\*\*Invictus Pride\*\*\_ and \_\*\*Carnixious \*\*\_to look for that ship. It's obvious these aliens have stealth technology of some kind. Perhaps if we get close enough we can pick up their signature again. But remind them that they are still under standing orders \_not \_to fire unless fired upon. I don't care if that ship re-appears a few thousand feet from their stern. And send an FTL transmission to the Citadel. But make sure I am explicitly asking that they \_not \_send any additional forces through the relay. I don't want this to escalate into something bad because of misunderstanding."

"Yes General" his XO replied.

"General, I have Alenna on the line" his comms officer informed him

"Put her through."

On board the Council exploration vessel \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_

Liara and Tali arrived in the CIC along with Mordin and a half dozen other personnel. The room was in a fury of action - more along the lines of controlled chaos. Rumors were plentiful and many were both excited and nervous at the prospect of what was occurring.

"Are you certain this isn't just some idiot Eclipse or merchant ship?" Alenna asked Lenora, the ship's sensor operator.

"Without a doubt. The ship is very similar to the design of many of these ruins. Also, it didn't use the Relay to get here, the only access point from our part of the galaxy. And there's this." She brought up an image of the ship's hull side, revealing the same type of alien writing the marked the ruined ships.

Tali had to admit, it was a beautiful ship. Beautiful, yet still oddly intimidating.

Alenna began her usual pacing when she was analyzing a situation.  
"And you're saying it vanished? Did it leave the system via FTL?"

"No, it just disappeared. And not just from our sensors, but from visual detection as well."

\_Disappeared? \_Tali thought. \_Do they have capable stealth technology? How do you make a ship invisible to both heat emissions \_and\_ visual detection?\_

As Alenna continued to take in every ounce of data she could, Tali spoke to Liara aside. "So, what do you think?"

Liara thought back to that salvaged photoscreen they had picked up on the space elevator, to that young child who appeared so happy and at peace. A smile crossed her face. "Well, it appears this species didn't go extinct. That is good to here."

"Yes. Yes. Good to hear. Suspected as much." Mordin said.

"Mordin, you believed they weren't extinct?" Tali asked.

"Of course. Naive to think otherwise. Delusional even. Glad to confirm this species lives on." He took in a deep breath. "Ship of contact troubling."

"What do you mean?" Liara asked.

The Salarian answered in his impossibly fast speech. "The ship has stealth technology. Stealth suggests espionage. Espionage suggests war and conflict. War ship only logical conclusion."

Liara frowned at that. She was so excited upon learning that this species still lived a few minutes ago. She felt like she was living through history - which all things considered, she was. After all her years of studying dead civilizations, it would be refreshing to be able to actually talk to these people; to not have to speculate about their culture through indirect evidence - to simply be able to ask - and receive answers from the source itself. What she would have done to get the chance to speak to a Prothean - or the extinct Inusannon, Arthenn, or Thoi'han. But what if they are like the Rachni or Krogan? Liara decided to stay positive.

"Just because it's a war ship doesn't mean it's hostile. It could simply be a routine patrol ship that got spooked when it entered the system and found us here. We are in their territory after all. With our own war ships I might add."

"Yes. Deeming them hostile just as naive as declaring them extinct. Didn't mean to insinuate otherwise. Only that the possibility exists. Hope for peace. Be prepared for war" Mordin said, repeating the ancient Salarian saying.

"Captain! I've got something here. You're not going to believe this" Korven, the ship's signal operator nearly shouted.

"Korven?"

"One of the research vessels stationed near the shattered ship designated U-14 happened to be looking at the right place at the right time. They've got a visual recording of that ship entering the system." The whole CIC quieted. "I'm bringing it up on screen now."

The main screen at first appeared to show nothing but the void of space, with millions of stars shinning in the background and a few visible rubble from the destroyed ships. And then suddenly, on the top right corner of the screen - a large, circular rupture seemed to appear out of nowhere. It looked like a large, flat disc - bluish black in color. It was as if someone punched a hole through the very fabric of space itself.

"What in the Goddess name is that?" It reminded Alenna of a black hole - with the obvious exception of color.

"Keep watching" Korven said. They did, and what they saw next stunned them.

The mysterious ship exited out of the bizarre, flat rupture. From the angle of the recording, they were at roughly 80 degrees from the direction the ship came through, meaning they could clearly see that this ship did indeed originate from that blue disk. It was the most bizarre thing ever. The ship just came out of nowhere - as if from another dimension.

"Keelah. That's incredible!"

"Hmm, obvious FTL transit system" Mordin thought out loud. "Not mass effect related. Wormhole of some kind? Space time-fold perhaps? Possibilities intriguing."

"Korven" Aleena said. "Get me in contact with General Fealix."

\* \* \*

><p>General Fealix had just finished watching the recording Alenna had forwarded to him; his mind analyzing what all of this meant. So, it was all but confirmed that these beings <em>could</em> travel without the mass effect. The ramifications of that one little fact alone was so profound that he doubted he could ever contemplate the impact it would have on the rest of the galaxy. But he would try nonetheless.

If he looked at it from a military perspective, which given his occupation was his first line of thought, then this could be very bad for the Citadel Council if there was ever conflict. The entire galaxy's defenses depended on safeguarding the mass relay 'chokepoints'. There were two types of relays; Primary Relays and Secondary Relays. The 'Prime Relays' linked across vast distances of the galaxy, but were only connected to one other relay. Secondary relays can link to any relay over shorter distance. So, in essence, the only way to get into Turian, Asari, or Salarian space was to pass through one of the Primary Relays leading into their territory. This made territorial defense surprisingly simple. The Prime Relays were heavily guarded by massive fleets to prevent invasion, while the Secondary Relays had token forces to protect against lesser threats, such as pirates and slavers. But if this species didn't need to use themâ€œ it would mean, potentially, that they were not bound by the mass relay network, and therefore could strike anywhere without warning. Such an impossibly distinct advantage seemed overwhelming.

"General" Alenna said, still in contact with the \*\*Majestic Spirit\*\*. "It seems that Councilor Tevos was correct in her summations." She seemed a bit over-joyous, not at all concerned with any negative consequence that might arise.

"Indeed she was" Fealix responded. "Although I'd bet even she would be surprised at how quickly we would make contact."

"I trust that you've sent the message?"

"I would, if I knew where to send it. With that ship going invisible, I have no way of tightly beaming the message to them. I could broadcast it through traditional radio signals. But it would just get jumbled with all of the other signals that have been broadcasted throughout the expedition."

"That's unfortunate" Alenna said simply.

"Yes, it seems that we'll just have to wait for them to reveal themselves again. In the meantime I have recalled my two frigates back from searching and ordered all ships to cease research and rally behind my position. Alenna, I want your ship to dock with mine. If we do make successful contact we're going to need you to meld with one of them and learn their language."

"I understand General. I'm heading to your ship now. Let me know ifâ€|"

"General!" one of his officers shouted, interrupting both Alenna and Fealix. "That ship has reappeared 500 kilometers from our position!"

The image of the ship was brought up on the main CIC screen. It was facing directly towards his ship, drifting a mere dozen meters next to some large rubble. Smart, he thought. If we were to engage, that ship could quickly take refuge behind the debris.

"General, we're receiving a message from the ship. You're going to want to see this."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: I know that it was revealed in ME3 that Councilor Valern was actually the Salarian Councilor. (Which means pretty much every fanfic got it wrong. lol) But I'm not going to change. In this fic Valern is the Turian councilor.</strong>

\*\*Also, another cliffhanger? Why? \*\*

\*\*Because I like seeing you guys squirm ;)\*\*

## 11. Chapter 11: Contact

\*\*A/N: Thanks for all of your reviews and support guys. Really, nearly 600 reviews? That's insane! You guys are awesome. Also, if you're a fan of alternate first contact fics like I am, you should check out the story 'From Hell's Heart' by gtamaster316. He's a talented writer and definitely deserves more reviews.\*\*

\*\*As for Captain John Miles, I based his image off of Adam Malkovich from Metroid (just google it). That guy looks seriously bad ass.\*\*

\*\*Now without further adoâ€|\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>UNSC Corvette <em><strong>Hades Gate</strong>\_

Captain Miles had his ship de-cloak next to the shattered remnants of a Covenant Class Heavy Corvette roughly 500 kilometers from the grouped alien ships. The near kilometer long oblong-shaped ship provided more than enough protection for the tiny \*\*Hades Gate\*\*. It was a tactical decision. If things turned for the worse, then he

would have two outstanding advantages - distance and cover. If the unknown vessels committed a hostile act, or did anything that vaguely represented hostility, then he would have plenty of time to maneuver his ship out of danger. His ship was facing directly towards the obvious flagship of the alien vessels. Their presence did not go unnoticed, as all six combat vessels took up positions facing towards \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_.

"Athena, any sign of hostile action?" Miles asked.

"Not explicitly Captain" Athena replied. "It seems the unknown vessels are more concerned with taking up defensive positions rather than preparing for offensive actions. Caution is still advised. Every weapon system in their arsenal is undoubtedly trained on us."

Miles grimly nodded in understanding. He now had a plethora of unknown alien weaponry trained upon his ship. Not an ideal position to be in, although he supposed he should be grateful they hadn't immediately fired upon him the second his ship disengaged its stealth systems. Had this been the Jiralhane or Kig-Yar, he would have received no such quarter. And it wasn't as if his ship was completely defenseless. Every singly weapon \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_ possessed was powered and ready to fire at a moment's notice. And his ship - despite being a primarily stealth and \_reconnaissance vessel - was armed to the teeth. In fact the Prowler Class Corvette packed almost as much fire power as a standard UNSC Frigate.\_ Still, he felt like the proverbial fish in a barrel. His only comforting thought was the knowledge that his ship could enter into the safety of slip-space if weapons started firing.

"Captain, everything is ready, shall I start the recording?" Rosa asked.

Along with the First Contact package, Miles was going to send a personal greeting to the alien ships. This was going to be a historical event regardless of how the situation turned out. And seeing as how he was likely going to give these aliens their first impression on humanity, he wanted to look every bit as professional and competent as was expected of UNSC officers. He did a quick glance-over of his navy uniform. His white coat was neatly pressed and his rank, ribbons, and medals were displayed prominently upon his chest. His peaked cap was decorated with the standard UNSC officer crest - a silver shield over two gold-crossed fouled anchors, surmounted by a silver eagle. His face - described by his fellow officers as stern and serious, made more so with his piercing blue eyes - was well groomed, a trait relentlessly drilled into every UNSC soldier during basic training. His sleek black hair, just beginning to get the first touches of grey, was neatly combed back.

"So, how do I look?" Miles asked.

"As fine as ever Sir" Rosa blurted without thinking. "I mean you look presentable" she quickly added, trying to hide her embarrassment. She could have been forgiven, as it was no secret that Captain Miles was the object of fantasy among many of the female crew. He was always considered very attractive to his female cohorts, despite his age.

"Alright, begin the recording." What followed next was a short, to the point greeting that was relayed alongside the First Contact

Package to every alien ship. The greeting seemed almost pointless; as it was extremely unlikely the aliens would be able to understand it. But Miles wanted to give the impression that they were open to dialogue.

"Message sent" Ensign Duran said. "Now what Sir?"

The first move had been made. The alien's reaction would determine the future. War or peace hinged on the balance. "Now, we wait."

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the Turian dreadnaught <em><strong>Majestic Spirits<strong>\_

"General, we're receiving a message from the ship. You're going to want to see this."

"Well, I guess we didn't have to wait long" General Fealix said. The fact that these creatures sent a message was a good sign, although it was obvious everyone was still on-edge. "What kind of message is it?"

"It contains both audio and visual recordings" his officer responded. "They're broadcasting to every ship in the system."

"General" Alenna said, still connected to Majestic Spirit. "We're receiving the same message. I'll let you go." General Fealix nodded, and Alenna was disconnected.

Fealix looked up at the main screen. The mystery ship was drifting motionlessly - watchingâ€|waiting. "I trust necessary precaution has been taken?" he asked.

"All cyber-defenses are at maximum. We are prepared to resist any hacking attempts" his second in command said.

General Fealix sighed. What occurred in the next moments could either be the beginning of peaceful scientific trade and advancement, or could be the beginning of another war. Pushing aside all feelings of unease, he silently repeated the old Turian axiom. \_No one values peace more than the soldier. \_"Send the prepared contact message to that ship. And play the message they've sent us."

\* \* \*

><p>On board the Council exploration vessel <em><strong>Seloria<strong>\_

"They're transmitting both visual and audio feeds?" Alenna asked.

"Yes" Korven replied. "The file is rather large."

\_Visual? \_Liara thought, \_that'll be interesting\_. Eversince she witnessed her first glimpse of this race through the photoscreen she had become intrigued with their remarkable resemblance to her own species. And she wasn't alone. The xeno-biologists were equally as baffled. In fact, other than the prospect of non-mass effect FTL travel and gravity, it became the highest focal point of the

expedition. A perfect three dimensional recording of the statue was taken, and thoroughly scrutinized by some of the galaxy's best xeno-biologists. Every part of the statue was analyzed; from body joints to the smallest of curves, from the size and composition of the body limbs to the measurements of the facial features. The results? It matched that of an Asari in every way. Perfectly. The distance between the eyes; the length of the limbs in comparison to the rest of the body; the position of the ears, nose, and mouth; the pupils, irises, teeth, and bodily figure - it all matched. One biologist even took the image of the presumed female on the photoscreen (based on the mammary glands) and shaded the entire body black so that only the outline visage remained - and then did the same to the image of an Asari and placed them side by side. With exception of that stringy fur stuff on the being's head, one would not be able to discern any noticeable difference. The xeno-biologists were at a complete loss. This kind of evolutionary similarity simply should not happen. Every bit of scientific logic and reasoning told them that for two different races - separated by tens of thousands of light years - to appear so alike was an impossibility. And yet...they had the photoscreen - and the statue - somehow defying reality and laughing in their collective faces.

Liara, like the others, had come to the conclusion of extreme coincidence in the evolutionary process. That perhaps their homeworld met the same conditions as the Asari homeworld of Thessia - a theory supported by the atmospheric ratio on the space elevator - and so similar evolutionary patterns developed. But in truth, she wasn't so sure. The sheer oddsâ€|it had to be one in a billion. But if not that, than what? What else could possibly explain the resemblance?

"Do you know what type of message it is?" Alenna said, snapping Liara's attention back into reality.

Korven shook his head. "There's only one way to find out."

The anticipation in the room was overwhelming. Tali was wringing her hands in a strange mix of nervousness and excitement. Mordin was grasping his chin while impatiently tapping his foot, clearly eager to see the transmission. Saren had his arms crossed, as stern and emotionless as ever. Everyone else was completely silent.

"Well," Alenna said, "no sense waiting any longer. Play the message."

Korven input the computer commands, and what everyone saw next literally caused gasps. On the main screen appeared the image of a single being - the same kind of being on the photoscreen, dressed in clean white clothing - with strange colored tags and gold dashed lines upon its chest and shoulders. The beings head fur, a mix of black and grey, was neatly brushed backwards, mostly covered by a strange looking headgear that Liara presumed was a hat. The 'hat' was elegantly adorned with gold and silver objects, with what looked like some kind of bird embezzled on the center. Definitely military uniform, Liara had no doubt. The being itself posed a striking image. Its face - so similar to an Asari - betrayed experience, and its piercing blue eyes held intelligence. It was quite obvious to everyone watching that this being was in command of the ship, as the creature seemed to emanate authority and respect.

And Liara had to admit - for an alien, the being wasn't half bad on the eyes either.

The being spoke in an alien language, its voice deep and authoritative. "'''Greetings. This is Captain John Miles of the UNSC \*\*\_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_\*\*. I am an officer of the United Nations Space Command - the military defense force of the Unified Earth Government. My species is called human. On behalf of humanity, I extend to you an offer of peace, friendship and prosperity between our peoples. However, if you swipe away this offering we will not hesitate to defend ourselves against any aggressive actions on your part. Humanity only wants peace with any and all sentient beings. Although if conflict is your desire, then we will do what must be done in order to secure the future, freedom, and lives of our people." \*\*The being took a short pause, looking almost reflective - before continuing.\*\* "We have seen enough conflict and suffering. Please, let there be peace between us."\*\*

"Goddess, if only I could understand their language" Alenna said, echoing the crew's thoughts.

As soon as the being was done speaking, the screen went blank, and for a short while Liara thought that this was all that was sent, until a plethora of images started sprouting on screen in lightning speed. They were bombarded with thousands upon thousands of images, text, and diagrams.

"What is this?" Alenna asked

It was Mordin who answered. "A variety of images. Depicting culture, art, biology, science, unity. All images positive in nature. No hostile appearance. Indication is clear. Obvious first contact message."

"Mordin is correct Captain" Lenora said. "This appears to be basic information about the species. It even seems to be divided into different categories."

"Different categories?"

"Yes. I'm opening the first group of data now" Lenora said.

The main screen suddenly displayed a diagram of the species. The first image contained a pair of the creatures - obvious gender dimorphism; male and female, both of mature age. Suddenly alien text appeared above the creatures - \*\*HUMAN\*\* - and then a voice spoke in much the same tone as the being they've just heard. "'''Human''' the audio said - very clear and direct. A line was drawn from the alien text to the creature on the right, the presumed male.

The audio repeated. "'''Human'''." But this time it was in a much higher tone, similar to that of an Asari. A line was drawn from the alien text to the creature on the left, the presumed female. The process repeated.

It was quite obvious what was being conveyed. Liara and Tali shared a glance, both smiling, not even trying to hide their excitement. The rest of the room was in much the same mood. Everything was going perfectly, and it seemed that peaceful contact was all but ensured. These creatures - humans! - had initiated peaceful contact of their

own violation.

"Humans huh" Alenna said, a grin present on her face.

"Huumaaannsss" she repeated, allowing the word to roll off her tongue, trying to get a feel for it.

The next image appeared. This time it displayed a lush garden world mostly covered in ocean. The land was mostly green, although there were plenty of patches of brown and white. The pair of crea - no, humans - were displayed on the right. A line was drawn from the humans to the planet as an audio file played. "\*\*\*Earth\*\*\*." Again, the process repeated. No other information about the planet - obviously their homeworld - was given. Liara was very excited. They now knew the name of this species and their homeworld.

"Ohh, this next file will be interesting" Lenora said mischievously.  
"It's a video file. Playing now."

The video file opened, showing what looked to beâ€¢is that - yes! Little human children, all smiling and facing towards the screen. The one centered in the middle of the group spoke. "\*\*\*Hello from the children of planet Earth\*\*\*. \*\*\*We come in peace for all mankind.\*\*\*" The children then began waving their little hands in the air and yelled the alien word "\*\*\*peace\*\*\*" in unison.

"That is so adorable!" Liara said. Seeing those little children - who looked so much like Asari children - warmed her heart. Everyone else in the CIC chuckled. The screen changed to a different location displaying a single human; this one an adult with a darker skin tone and long head fur - a female, by evidence of the mammary glands. Liara started noticing patterns between this species - like how the females had higher voice tones and longer fur. "\*\*\*Hola y\*\*\*\*saludos a todos\*\*\*" the human said, and then bowed her head.

As soon as she was done speaking, the video moved to another location displaying another human. A male, if Liara guessed right. He had short black fur and his eyes were of noticeably different shape. She wondered how much variety this species had. The human was wearing a very exotic looking robe - a mixture of black, white and blue. He bowed from the waist at a 45 degree angle - much more formal than the other human previously - as he spoke. "\*\*\*Konnichiwa ogenki desuka.\*\*\*"

"It seems these are greetings" Alenna noted.

Another human was displayed. This one caught Tali's attention. "Wow, these people wear Veils too?" she asked to no one in particular. The human was almost completely covered from head to toe, with just the face visible. It reminded Tali of her own people in a way. "\*\*\*Salam wa aleikum\*\*\*" the human said, nodding her head.

Again, the video showed another human - this one with a black skin tone. "\*\*\*Salamu kwa\*\*\*\*marafiki zetu\*\*\*\*katika nyota\*\*\*\*. \*\*\*\*Tunataka\*\*\*\*kwamba sisi\*\*\*\*kukutana na wewe\*\*\*\*siku moja\*\*." The video continued in this fashion for over a minute, showing the many different kinds of humans. Liara was truly amazed at the variety of this species. Finally, the last part of the video was shown, much more different than the rest. It displayed a single, well-dressed human standing in front of an enormous building.

"\*\*Greetings. I am the Speaker of the House of the United Earth Council - the governing body of the human race. We welcome you with open arms, and hope for a peaceful coexistence and continued prosperity for the ages to come. May peace be upon you always\*\*." The video then ended.

"This first group of data seems to be focused solely on greetings" Lenora said. "The other categories seem to have much more detailed information."

"You said there are five categories?" Alenna asked

"Yes." Lenora responded. "Including the greetings, there are four others. One is focused on the biology of this species. Another seems to focus on art and culture. The last two categories have to do with what I think is arithmetic and language."

A smile crossed Alenna's lips. "Well, what is everyone waiting for? I want every content of this message analyzed and deciphered by their respective fields. Let's get to work people." The room suddenly descended into a fury of action as the scientists, researchers, and technicians went to work.

\* \* \*

><p>UNSC Corvette <em><strong>Hades Gate<strong>\_

"So you're saying that ship sent us a first contact message too?" Captain Miles asked.

Athena had already viewed the entirety of the message sent to \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_, twice, in a matter of milliseconds - before the crew even knew they've received it. Such are the blessings of being an AI. "Yes. Like our message, it contains peaceful images and basic information. However, unlike ours it shows many different races."

"Different races? How many?"

"See for yourself Captain" Athena replied. She brought up the images on the projector. The first image was of the race most prominently showed, and certainly most intriguing. To say that Athena was shocked at its appearance would be an understatement.

"This is a race of blue humanoids. Emphasis on the \_human" \_Athena said.

Audible gasps were heard throughout the crew. Captain Miles raised a brow. He might as well have been looking at a female human with blue skin. With the exception of those tentacle things on her head - he assumed it was a female - she looked like a human in every way.

"Jesus Athena. These creatures look almost human. How is that possible?"

"There is very little information concerning their biology" Athena said. "And none concerning their genetic traits in the message. It could be a case of similar evolutionary environments producing similar results, although the odds of that happening are astronomical."

"Wow, attractive aliens. That's two words I thought I'd never see together." Duran said.

"There's something peculiar about this species" Athena said. She brought up an image of two of the creatures locked arm in arm, with what was clearly a fetus shown growing in one of the creature's stomach. Again, Miles was struck by the similarity of the fetus to human fetuses. "Based on the diagram, this is a representation of the species reproduction."

"But they both look female" Duran said, echoing Miles' thoughts.

"Yes, that is what is peculiar. Out of the entire message, there are no images of any males from this species. It seems that this is mono-gendered race" Athena said. "And before you ask how that's possible, I believe it may have something to do with some form of telepathy."

"Telepathy? You mean they have mind powers?" Miles asked skeptically.

Athena brought up various images of the species. Some showed them 'levitating' objects with a bluish-purple field surrounding them and the things they were moving. Others showed pairs of the creatures with their heads joined together - and just like the other diagram - depicted one of each with a fetus growing inside. "I believe they somehow link minds to reproduce."

"That's incredible" Miles said simply.

"So, an entire race of hot blue alien chicks. This might turn out great after all." Duran said, receiving laughter from the male crew. Rosa rolled her eyes. Men.

"This is just one race. You said there were others?" Miles asked.

"Yes. While these creatures seem to be the most prominent and influential of the races, there are seven in total, including the first shown" Athena replied.

"Seven" Miles said shocked. "Are you serious? We're dealing with that many races?"

"Assuming they've disclosed all races known to them, then yes. If there are other races they didn't put in the message, I have no way of knowing" Athena answered. "The races that are listed seemed to be united under a single organization." She brought up an image of what looked like a very large space station. It had five long 'arms' stretching out, all connected to a central ring on the end. "Based on the data this seems to be the capital of their organization. It's a massive space station that, if the measurements I've been able to ascertain are correct, is between 40 to 45 kilometers long."

Miles stomach churned. A group of aliens under a single government organization? "This seems like the covenant all over again" Miles said warily.

"I don't think so" Athena replied. "Based on the data shown" she

brought up more images, depicting a variety of other races - these ones decidedly less human looking, "It seems that each species of this organization still holds their own individual anatomy. It's more comparable to the early stages of the UN rather than the covenant."

That seemed to alleviate the tension in the room. "So, you're saying these groups of aliens managed to find a peaceful co-existence?"

"It is likely that this message has a more positive tone than what is present in reality - just like ours - but we're clearly not dealing with genocidal zealots" Athena said. "And as for that machine orbiting the fifth planet, you'll be pleased to find that it's not a weapon. It's an FTL transit system - one that doesn't use slip-space to travel faster than light." Athena said.

"What do you mean? They've found another form of FTL travel?" Miles asked surprised.

Athena brought up the large object orbiting the fifth planet. "We assumed this may have been a weapon of some sort, however, now it is clear that it's actually a transportation device. According to the data, these machines can launch a ship over incredible distances almost instantaneously. They've even included a video of how it works. I'm playing it now."

Miles watched as the video played on the holoprojector. A small ship was heading towards the massive monolith - a flea in comparison. Once the ship got close enough to the spinning core, a spark of what looked like blue electricity shot out from the sphere to the ship. In an instant the ship zoomed into unfathomable speeds. The screen changed, this time depicting a duplicate machine. The slowly moving rings started spinning rapidly, and the ship instantly came through.

"Athena, is using these massive machines the only way they can utilize FTL travel?" Miles asked.

"No. It is the only way they can travel vast distances. However, in short distances they can still travel in FTL, although significantly slower. It should be noted that they've somehow found a way to move faster than light in real space - a feat which we've always considered impossible."

Huh, so it seems Einstein was wrong after all, Miles thought.  
"Athena, this is all a bit much to take in."

"As I'm sure they're thinking the same captain. The prospect of traveling through different dimensions seems to be unknown to them" Athena said. "And imagine what their reactions would be to the Halos. Based on the data they don't have anything on scale to the planet-sized constructs."

Miles nodded. The Halo arrays were purposely not put in the first contact message. Nor was there anything concerning the former covenant species. It was decided that everything in the message should be as non-threatening as possible.

"What about these other races? What can you tell me about them?" Miles asked curiously.

Over the course of the next ten minutes Athena went through each race one by one. One race reminded Miles of Earth's amphibious lizards. They had huge eyes with two horn-like tendrils sprouting from their heads. As a species they looked rather frail. They were warm-blooded mammals, but laid eggs - a rare ability among the mammalian class. Another species sort of resembled the Sangheili in a way, although they were much smaller - more on-par with human size - and looked more avian. This species had three sharp claws and seemed to possess a rather hard exoskeleton. Another thing Miles noted; the images from that species seemed focused on more combative roles - such as security on that massive space station - or depicted them standing or marching in uniformity. It looked like military discipline of Miles ever saw it. He made a mental note to be cautious of this species. It was obvious these creatures evolved as predators.

One species Athena showed was just beyond bizarre. Miles couldn't tell which side was its head and which was its rear end, as it had no eyes or mouth to speak of. To be honest it looked like aâ€|likeâ€|well, a Big. Freaking. Jellyfish. Its long tentacles grazed the ground, but didn't seem like it was what was supporting them up. Apparently, they communicated with bioluminescence - much like Earth's deep sea life - which made sense, due to their homeworld being 90% water.

The next species shown was composed of massive quadrupedal creatures. If Miles had to compare them to another species, he would say they mostly resemble elephants. These creatures evolved on a high gravity world, Miles was told. That would certainly explain their huge muscular mass. He briefly wondered how they would stack up against Hunters.

One of the species shown looked almost comical to Miles' eyes. And from the snickers he heard, his crew must have agreed. They looked fat and plump, and were wearing enviro-suits of some sort. Miles remarked that they reminded him of the Unggoy, to which Athena said was not in inaccurate assessment - as both species shared the rare trait of evolving on a methane-based world. Like the Unggoy, this species had to wear breathers.

The last species shown looked reptilian in design. They were humanoid, with large black eyes and two sets of eyelids. Instead of skin, they seemed to possess scales of some kind - green in color - although the scales were noticeably missing around their necks and lower jaw area. Almost every image of them showed a connection to the strange tentacle species. Athena speculated that these two species must have a very close relation to one another, although why remained a mystery. Out of all of the species, this one had the least information on it.

Miles took a brief moment to compose himself after the bombardment of data Athena threw his way. So, he didn't just find a new species, he found an entire galactic civilization - one composed of many species - and it was not at all like the covenant. Despite the huge weight that seemed to be lifted off his shoulders from that revelation, he was still weary. And he knew that once this discovery became public, humanity as a whole would still be weary. As we should be, Miles thought. Humanity would never again find itself caught in the same situation it was during the Great War. It was a promise made by President Ruth Charet after the UNSC relinquished power back to the

Unified Earth Government with the conclusion of the war in 2553.

\_ "Humanity can now breathe again. The Covenant has finally been driven back. The cost in lives- our troops and our citizens- has been enormous. But freedom never comes cheaply, and now, we rebuild. I promise this to every man, woman, and child on Earth and in its colonies. While we will continue to strive for a peaceful coexistence with other species, humanity will never again allow itself to be the victim of aggression. This is the moment we start to reclaim our rightful place in the universe.\_ "

And the UEG kept that promise. While humanity spent the decades rebuilding, it never once stopped its military buildup. Nor did humanity ever ease up its guard either. The UNSC continued to produce ship after ship - create fleet after fleet. Humanity's best researchers never stated in their goal to reverse-engineer forerunner tech. With the former covenant species devastated and in ruin by both the Great War and the Schism, and with humanity's unyielding military and technological development - the human race was not only more powerful than ever - but was now speculated to be \_the \_most powerful species in the known galaxy. Even outdoing the Sangheili in military might.

\_But now we've just found a whole new part of the 'known'\_ \_galaxy. Full of species with unknown capabilities and unheard of technology.\_ Miles knew that although the prospect for the future was looking hopeful, nothing was ever set in stone. "Duran, send another flash FTL transmission to HIGHCOMM. Update them on everything we've learned so far."

"Aye Sir" Duran responded. "What do we do in the mean time?"

"We wait for them to respond to our message" Miles said. He took in a deep breath, and then let his chest slowly deflate. The tension of the situation was overwhelming. "And as always, be prepared for anything. Even combat" he finally added.

\* \* \*

><p>On board the Council exploration vessel  
<em><strong>Seloria<strong>\_

Professor Mordin had seen many things in his relatively short Salarian life. But what he was seeing now just seemed impossible. \_Unfathomable. \_As soon as the data of the 'human' biology was sent to him, he went to work furiously. This species was kind enough to offer a plethora of biological data. Basically everything about their body was shown. From the skeletal structure, muscular tissue, organs, right down to the nervous system. They had even provided their DNA structure. From the get-go Mordin was amazed. The human's organs were an \_exact match \_to the Asari. The position, size, function - all the same. The skeletal structure too. The bones were identical - all 206 of them. It was at this point that Mordin knew this wasn't a chance of 'cosmic coincidence'. Something else was at work here. Something truly extraordinary. Something that would - if true - shake the galactic society, particularly Asari society, to its very core. When Mordin compared the species genetic structure to the Asari, his suspicions had - beyond any doubt - been confirmed.

Mordin activated his omni-tool and contacted Alenna.

"Mordin, what is it?" Alenna said over his comms.

"Please come to the lab. I need to speak with you in person. I've discovered something astonishing."

\_That Humans and Asari are related.\_

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Wait, what? How is \_that\_ possible? Gee, could it have something to do with - oh, I don't know - the forerunners and their god-like attitude towards manipulating the development of life?  
\*hint hint\*\*\*

\*\*As for the First Contact message, I took a lot of inspiration from the Voyager's Golden Record. Also, cookies for those who can translate the different languages.\*\*

\*\*And as always, thanks for reading.\*\*

## 12. Chapter 12: Revelation

Onboard the Turian dreadnaught \_\*\*Majestic Spirits\*\*\_

"Still no word from the Hierarchy or Council?" Fealix asked, becoming increasingly annoyed.

"No" his comms officer replied. "We have not been able to make contact with our forces on the other side of the Relay for some time now."

Now General Fealix was beginning to worry. It was standard protocol to report in with units on the other end of the relay every few hours. Two mass relay comm buoys - an expenditure that did not come cheap - were placed on either end of the Mass Relay at the beginning of the expedition, allowing for near instantaneous communications with the Citadel and Hierarchy. The comm buoys were primitive miniature mass relays; each one linked to a partner buoy, creating a corridor of low-mass space. Communications could then be tight-beamed through these FTL corridors, allowing for near instantaneous comms within the network. During their time in the Tyrogg system they were in constant contact with the rest of the galaxy, giving updates and progress reports. Unfortunately there seemed to be a blackout of communications at what seemed like the worst of times. The \_\*\*Majestic Spirits\*\*\_ had tried to report in on everything that had occurred - from the alien ship appearing to the contact message - only to find that they received no reply. At first Fealix brushed it off as technical issues, however unlikely that was. When operating in space, \_everything\_ had secondary and tertiary systems as safeguards that would begin operating if the primary systems failed. This was especially true for communication systems - as they were among the most vital when in space. Still, Fealix knew that no matter how much one prepared, things could - and probably would - go wrong. So the communications blackout alone - even at such a critical time as this - normally wouldn't have been much of a concern.

\_But why hadn't they sent a ship through the relay to update the

status of the comms systems?

Doing so would take only minutes and would alleviate any potential fears or risks. Worse, his comms weren't picking up anything, not even background radio noise. Had the other comms relay simply malfunctioned, he should still be able to pick up the incomprehensible static of radio waves. Instead, he was gifted with complete and total comms silence. It was as if the other relay buoy simply wasn't there anymore - as if the Hierarchy patrol on the other end of the relay had just decided to pack up and leave without so much as a parting gesture. He briefly wondered, could it be!

He looked up at the main CIC screen; the sleek black alien vessel remained in position, as motionless and ominous as ever. The predator ship was ready to leap into action at the first sign of trouble - rather in defensive or offensive action Fealix didn't know - didn't want to know. He had the upmost confidence that if hostilities commenced, he could easily eradicate the lone threat with his superior numbers. But he had no way of knowing their capabilities, and he rather not lose a frigate - and more importantly good Turian soldiers - by whatever weird non-mass effect weapon that thing was bound to posses in its arsenal. And of course he was assuming there was only one ship here. These beings have already demonstrated an impressive ability to cloak their ships. For all he knew he could be unknowingly surrounded by dozens of these vessels - just waiting to receive the orders to engage his forces. And even if that wasn't the case - and his gut feeling told him it wasn't - the alien ship had undoubtedly sent transmissions to its command structure on the events that have transpired. In truth, he could have an entire fleet heading his way right at this very moment. Needless to say - superior numbers aside - he wasn't in a very good bargaining position. He was in unknown territory and could very well face off with unknown ships with unknown capabilities with unknown origins. And now, he was cut off from the rest of the Hierarchy forces at the other end of the relay. The more Fealix thought about it, the more the timing of the comms blackout just seemed utterly fantastical.

Could that ship be what's causing the blackout?

It would not be an outrages assertion to believe. Although the Council had no known technology that could block tight-beam transmissions, that didn't mean that they didn't. After all, what were the odds of the blackout occurring just moments before that ship arrived? Fealix felt like a lead weight had settled at the bottom of his stomach as he realized just how much he was fumbling in the dark. He needed to get into contact with the Council and Hierarchy. And he was unwilling to wait any longer.

"Tritus" Fealix addressed his executive officer, "send the frigate \*\*Invictus Pride\*\* through the Relay and have them ferry the data we have ascertained so far. I don't know what's causing the comms blackout, but I have a feeling it's something more than technical issues."

"Yes Sir" his second-in-command replied, belaying his orders to his inferiors. \*\*Invictus Pride\*\* confirmed its orders and set course for the relay. Fealix noted that at the sudden activity of the Frigate the alien ship shifted its position slightly towards the debris for protection. From his vantage half the ship was now hidden behind the rubble.

His gut told him something bad was about to happen. And he always listened to his gut.

\* \* \*

><p>On board the Council exploration vessel  
<em><strong>Seloria<strong>\_

Mordin Solus was so enthralled upon his discovery that he didn't even notice Captain Alenna enter the \_\*Seloria's\* lab station. The implicationsâ€œit would have a profound effect in so many ways that he didn't even try to predicts the ramifications once this became known to the galaxy at large. Instead, he tried to focus on how this was possible, reviewing in his mind everything he knew about Asari history and biology. He was, after all, a scientist Salarian - and therefore had studied species such as Turian, Asari, and Batarian. But that was during his much younger days, and his memories were a bit sketchy - an unfortunate sign of his aging self. At 42 years, he was pushing the limits of his species unfortunate life span.

Mordin thought back to the evolutionary process of the Asari - or rather, a lack thereof. It had always been a mystery as to why there were very few known Thessian animals that remotely resembled the Asari on a genetic level. Every other species in the galaxy could trace their roots back to their more primitive biological cousins and ancestors. Sur'Kesh, for example, had a wide variety of amphibious species in its vast rainforests, including the Salveridians - a large lizard species that roamed through the wilderness of Sur'Kesh and were the Salarians closest living genetic cousins. The Turian homeworld of Paleven was abound with the avian-like species of their kind - the Vlorik being their closest genetic ancestors. The Hanar could trace their genetic heritage to the plethora of Kahje's sea life. The Elcor's closest living relatives are the Elfordus - large terrestrial giants that were twice the size of the Elcor, and still to this day roamed the great plains of Dekunna as they had for hundreds of thousands of years.

But the Asari seemed to be a stigma on Thessia. Not only was their no evidence of their genetic heritage, but they were also the only species on the planet that mated through mind melding. Furthermore, they were the only highly developed species on Thessia that were mono-gendered, with only some of the primitive worm and insect species of the planet sharing this trait. That is why it wasn't a shock to the Asari when they first encountered the Salarians and their dual genders. In simple truth, the Asari genetic origins were a mystery, despite thousands of years of studied. The closest related species that could be discovered were the Shia - a four-legged creature that had a thick coat of fur and a long snout. The Asari shared an 81% similarity in DNA to the Shia - which were kept as pets by the Asari. It was important to note that the Shia species itself also seemed to be a phenomenon on Thessia - being one of the very few species that had fur, as well as no known ancestral heritage.

As for the Asari reproduction methodsâ€œone of the greatest mysteries was that despite the fact that Asari reproduce through mind melding, they still possessed sexual organs associated with bi-gendered species. Not only that, but they also experienced physical pleasure when these sexual regions were aroused - a biological response that should not have developed with a species that reproduced asexually.

In terms of Asari culture, there were two distinct forms of 'mating' for lack of a better word. There was 'spiritual mating' - which was when an Asari and her partner mind-melded to produce offspring. This was the most sacred of Asari bonding, and was treated with the upmost grace and dignity. Then there was the more free-spirited 'physical mating' - which occurred when the Asari took part in actions that stimulated the 'Azure' regions of the body. This could hardly be considered 'mating' since it was not a process of reproduction, but the Asari treated it as such, and the euphoria they received during the climax of such unions was similar to that of bi-gendered species. Because of the Asari possessed the ability to join with a partner by both mentally - through mind melding - and physically - completely unnecessary to their reproduction - many geneticists have come to believe that the Asari themselves - or at least their genetic ancestors - may have once been bi-gendered like most of Thessia's animal life. Although proving this was difficult considering how little they knew of their biological ancestry.

And, further mystifying the matter of biology on Thessia, there seemed to be a string of wildly different species and sub-species that had no relation to each other whatsoever. Scientists from across the galaxy became so perplexed by the unusual biology of Thessia that the term 'The Thessian Mystery' was coined by a Salarian researcher - and had become somewhat of a popular saying in citadel culture to describe unexplainable occurrences. One Asari geneticist once jokingly proclaimed that it was as if someone had taken dozens of species from different planets throughout the galaxy and dumped them all on Thessia. Many Asari even came to believe the wilder theories that the Protheans may have once interfered with Thessia's biology in its earlier stages of development, pointing to some of the ancient ruins found on the moons of their home system - although this was unlikely as there were no Prothean ruins on the planet itself.

Alenna stopped in front of Mordin as he was pacing back and forth, mumbling unintelligently to himself, completely oblivious to her presence. "Dr. Solus, you said this was an emergency. What did you find?"

But this, Mordin thought to himself, could explain why Thessia's biology was so strange and genetically unrelated. This new species - the 'humans' - shared a 98.6% similarity with the Asari (and by extension, an 85% similarity with Shia); meaning that the Asari and humans shared a similar evolutionary path; meaning that they had to have evolved on the same planet. The implications were profound. Did these two species evolve on Thessia and were somehow separated thousands of years ago? It would not be an impossible theory - the Protheans could have very well interfered with the earlier stages of Thessian life. Perhaps they removed the Asari cousins from Thessia and placed them on another planet to see how they developed among different paths.

"Mordin, what is it you wanted to speak to me about?" Alenna reiterated, trying to gain Mordin's attention.

Or perhaps it's the other way around. What if the Asari never evolved on Thessia? What if they were transported there somehow from the 'human' homeworld? 'Earth', if he remembered correctly. It was well known that the earliest fossils that could be found from the Asari dated back to roughly 100,000 years ago. Perhaps this was when

they were first introduced to the planet\_. \_So many possibilities, so many implications.\_

"Mordin!" Alenna nearly shouted, clearly annoyed at being brought to the lab just to be ignored at such an important time. This grabbed Mordin's attention, he stopped dead in his tracks. "General Fealix wants me to board his ship soon, so if you have something important to tell me, then out with it" she said as she crossed her arms, perhaps more harshly than she intended.

"Ah, apologies Captain. Meant no offensive. Information I have is critical. Perhaps the most important discovery of your race."

Alenna raised a brow. "Of my race? Mordin, what are you talking about? I thought the sections of the contact message you were studying contained the basic biology of their species."

"Yes, must explain" Mordin responded. "Tell me Alenna, what do you know about Asari evolution?"

"What does this have to do withâ€|"

"Just tell me what you know" Mordin cutoff.

Alenna sighed. "Only that our genetic ancestry is incomplete at best. Apparently biological life on Thessia is unusual in the galaxy, and we have yet to discover our genetic descendants."

Mordin smiled. "Yes, and what kind of theories has this postulated?"

Alenna was becoming irritated, but did her best not to show. Why was this topic so important at a time like this? She continued to play into the Doctor's charade. "Most believe that Thessia is simply an anomaly when it comes to biodiversity and leave it at that. The lack of evidence of our ancestors is believed to be because we simply haven't found the fossils yet."

"That is one theory yes. But there are other - more exotic ones, are there not?" Mordin asked.

Alenna shrugged. "I suppose"

"And what do you know about them?" Mordin urged on.

"Well, I've heard some pretty crazy extranet theories - some people believe an ancient space ferring race - perhaps the Protheans - screwed with Thessia's biology thousands of years ago." Alenna said. She sighed once more. She hated being lead on, and she especially hated it when someone was teasing her with information, as Mordin was definitely doing. "Mordin, I have little time for this, what is it you want to tell me?"

"As you know" Mordin began, "this species -

"The humans" Alenna interjected.

"Right, the humans, provided basic detail about their biology and genetics." He handed Alenna the datapad.

"What am I looking at here?" she asked.

"On the left is the speciâ€|the humans basic DNA makeup. On the right is Asari DNA. The graph in the middle is a representation of genetic comparison between the two."

Alenna gave a bewildered look. "Mordin, why would you be comparing our DNA structure like this?"

"Look at the graph closely" Mordin answered.

As Alenna studied the graph and read the statistics her eyes continually grew wider. "Thisâ€|hang on, this can't be right" she said while pacing. "Mordin, is thisâ€|this can't be."

"It is. There's a 98.6% similarity in the DNA structure of Asari and these 'humans'." Mordin smiled. "They are your genetic cousins!"

Alenna was near stunned into silence, trying to comprehend what Mordin had just revealed to her. "By the Goddess" she said, voice almost a whisper. "Thisâ€|this can't be right."

\* \* \*

><p>Liara and Tali were both in one of many of the <em><strong>Seloria's <strong>\_research rooms, going over the data that they received in the contact message.

"This is so exciting" Tali exclaimed. "I can't wait until further contact occurs. Imagine the kind of technology they have. The things we can learn."

"You're still hyped about their computer tech and non-mass effect FTL aren't you?" Liara chided.

"Of course. Do you know what this could mean for my people? It would mean no longer being restricted to eezo rich systems. No more wasted effort on mining or discharging our drive cores after every jump. This could be a whole new future for my people!" she said a bit enthusiastically.

Liara smiled at the innocents of the young Quarion. While others here wanted to make a name for themselves during the expedition, Tali's concern was only in helping her people. "I'm just glad they appear to be friendly" Liara said.

"Appear is the key word" a voice said behind her, causing a shiver to race down her spine. She turned to face the unwanted interrupter. \_Saren\_.

"You should not be so gullible" Saren continued. "We have no idea what their intentions are."

"Their intentions seem pretty benign to me" Liara answered back.

"Is that so?" He walked past the two, causing both of them to move out of the way as he neared the viewport window. "Sure, that message was full of peaceful images, but notice what \_wasn't \_in the message."

"What do you mean?" Tali said while crossing her arms in an unconscious defensive gesture.

"There was only one species displayed in the message. Themselves. But look around us" he gestured out of the window towards the drifting debris. "There were at least two different species that fought here. Why weren't they in the message?"

"Must you always assume the worst?" Liara said slightly agitated. "Maybe they thought it wasn't important during such a time as this. Maybe they just decided not to include it."

"It is you who are assuming" Saren answered. "You may very well be right. But you may also very well be wrong. They could be peaceful, or for all we know, they could have hunted the other species down to extinction. They could be plotting action against us as we speak."

"Do you really think they would do that." Tali said, more of a affirmation of disbelief than a serious question.

"Do you really think they'll just readily hand over valuable technology to any vagrant who begs for it?" He fired back.

Tali was about to respond when Saren's comms chimed. He put his hand over his ear, completely ignoring the death glare Tali was giving him. "Understood, I'll come aboard with Captain T'Velos once we dock with the ship."

He left them without so much as a nod of their existence. Liara gave Tali a worried look. "Don't worry about him Tali!"

Tali put a hand up, cutting off Liara in mid sentence. "It's okay Liara. I'm fine, really."

"Are you sure?" she asked, not convinced.

"Yes, now come on, we have more important things to concern ourselves with right now." Liara nodded and they both resumed their examination of the data. In truth, Tali wasn't okay. She hated that Turian with a passion. He had a nag for completely ruining her day at the most inopportune of times. Worse, now that she thought about it, the Bosh'tet was probably right. She was being naive. Did she really think they could ever help her people? No, they probably would treat us like filth, or at the very least ignore us, like the rest of the galaxy does. Tali clenched her fist. She didn't care. She was on her pilgrimage to help her people, and no one would stop her from accomplishing that goal.

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the<em><strong> Majestic Spirits<strong>\_

General Fealix had been impatiently pacing back and forth in the CIC while waiting for news of any new developments. So far, there had been none. The alien ship had remained in place, and no new data was sent out between ships.

Fealix's executive officer stepped up to him. "I've just received

word from Saren. The Seloria will be docking with our ship in a few minutes."

"Good, also tell Alenna I want a full debriefing on everything they've learned so far" Fealix ordered.

"Sir" one of his sensor operators said, "the Mass Relay is showing activity."

\_Good, the \_\*\*Invictus Pride\*\*\_ is about to return. Maybe I'll get some answers on the comms blackout.\_

"A ship just came through. Positive IFF on the \_\*\*Invictus Pride\*\*\_ andâ€|Sir! Something's wrong. The ship has taken significant damage!" A visual was brought up on the main screen. The amount of damage was substantial, so much so that it was a miracle onto itself that the ship was still functioning. There was a large hole in its stern, while much of the ship's 'belly' was almost completely sheared off.

"What in the spirits name" Fealix said, shocked. "Put the ship's Captain online now!".

In seconds the Captain of the crippled frigate was connected to the CIC of the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_. \*\*\_The Captain himself was bleeding profusely from a head wound, and Fealix could see a few dead bodies that lay on the ground behind him. "Captain Karso, what has happened."

"General, were under attack! The patrol fleet on the other end of the Relay has been completely destroyed. We barely made it out alive."

"Attacked? Who did this?" Fealix demanded.

Before the Captain could answer his sensor officer interrupted. "Sir, more contact are coming through the Relay!" The image of the Relay was brought up on the main screen, and General Fealix, to his absolute dismay, saw dozens of hostile ships exit through. These ships were not unknown to him, he just thought he would never actually see one. Anyone who got close enough to encounter them usually ended up dead.

"They're opening firing on \_\*\*Invictus Pride!\*\*\_ \*\*\_

"Captain Karso, take evasive maneuvers now!" Fealix said desperately. He knew it was all but over for the fledgling frigate.

"We can't, our engines are spattering out. We're completelyâ€|Ahhh!"

\_Static.\_

On the CIC screen \_\*\*Invictus Pride\*\*\_ was utterly shredded apart by dozens of mass accelerator rounds - its shields giving out among the mass of heavy fire waged upon it. General Fealix quickly gave a silent prayer for their spirits, and then went into action. "Order all ships into battle stations. I want the research vessels to group up and take cover behind that \_Leviathan \_ship."

"Sir, the alien ship just engaged its stealth systems. We've lost

track of it."

General Fealix looked up towards one of the screens, it could see that indeed the ship had disappeared. "Never mind them" he said. "They're not a threat as of right now."

"Who is the threat?" Tritus asked. "Who's attacking us?"

General Fealix looked once again at the dozens of ships heading his way - merciless, unrelenting. These vessels held no spirit within them - only cold, hard logic. He had never faced these ships before, never thought he ever would. But he certainly knew what they were, and knew how dangerous they could be.

"Re-orient our ships and bring every last weapon system online. The Geth have arrived."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Sorry about the delay in update. Life is busy. I'll try to churn out chapter quicker (no promises). \*\*\*\*I contemplated not ending this chapter on a cliffhanger, but I think you guys can handle it ;)\*\*

\*\*Imaginary cookies for those who can guess what kind of animal "Shia's" are.

><strong>

### 13. Chapter 13: Crossroads part 1

UNSC Corvette \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_

"All crew prepare for combat! Ready all offensive weapons!" Miles yelled over the frenzy that occurred when the alien ship returned through the FTL transportation device. Roughly half an hour ago the crew of \_\*\*Hades Gate\*\*\_ had nervously watched as that same ship had dispatched from the other grouped vessels and headed towards the machine. From the moment they entered the Epsilon System, the crew of \_\*\*Hades Gate \*\*\_had been on edge, and when that lone ship began moving Miles was briefly terrified that the worse was about to come. Fortunately, the ship didn't head towards them, but instead went for the massive monolith - giving Miles and his crew a very impressive display of how the machine worked.

Impressive. Amazing. And \_very\_ unnerving. It didn't have to take a quantum physicist to know that the machine had to hold tremendous amounts of energy to send a vessel thousands of light years in an instant. More unnerving - why did these aliens feel the need to destroy a moon and replace it with the machine? Why not just put the machine in orbit around the moon - or anywhere else in the system for that matter? It just didn't make sense. Apparently, Athena didn't have an answer either. Although the contact message they received focused heavily on these transportation devices, no information or diagram was given on their origins or how they were made - or even how they functioned. Not something to be surprised about - Miles didn't expect them to reveal how their greatest technologies worked in a message only meant for first contact. The UNSC would never reveal how their reverse-engineered Forerunner engines worked either. Still, it left a lot of open questions as to their motives and

intentions.

But even through all of the doubt and suspicions, Miles held onto the slim hope that the aliens wanted what he wanted - nice, easy, uneventful, peaceful contact. Unfortunately, that one sliver of hope was squashed, trampled, and thrown out of the window when the alien ship that went through the machine returned - maimed and barely holding together. The ship - or what was left of the drifting metal wreckage - came through the machine and immediately set course for the other grouped ships. Judging by the reactions of the rest of the alien vessels, it was clear that they were completely caught off guard. All five of the combat vessels immediately turned to face the machine, and Athena noted that the side and under panels of the ships were opening up - obviously readying weapons.

Athena wasted no time listing the details she could discover. "Captain, the ship has taken significant damage to its stern. I can detect trace amounts of oxygen leaking out, and the ship is struggling to maintain its thrusters. Its course is set to regroup with the other ships" Athena told him as she moved \*\*Hades Gate\*\* behind the wreckage of the destroyed Covenant Corvette. She also launched a mini sensor probe so they could still receive a visual once they were fully behind the Corvette.

"Is there any indication of who did this?" Miles asked.

"No" Athena replied. "The damage is inconsistent with any weapons deployed by the former covenant or UNSC."

That was enough to settle at least one question roaming in Miles' mind. So it wasn't the Kig-Yar or Jiralhanea - and most certainly not the UNSC or URS. It would probably be silly to even consider it given the situation, but Miles was always thorough - and he never discarded a possibility until he knew the facts.

"Captain, orders?" a slightly antsy Ensign Duran asked.

Miles considers his options. He could just leave the system and head towards the closest UNSC colony - Chi Cheti IV. It would be the safest, probably most logical course to take. Yet he also knew leaving now would leave a whole lot of questions left unanswered. The more HIGHCOM new about the situation, the better the UNSC could respond adequately. And, for the first time since entering the system, the aliens were not pointing their main guns towards his ship. It would have been a comforting sign were it not for the present situation. What that meant exactly Miles didn't know. Were they expecting hostiles entering the system? After all, something out there dealt the limping alien vessel a major blow. Did they no longer consider his ship a threat? Whatever force they were readying against, the aliens obviously felt it was more of a pressing concern than him and his crew.

The sensor probe that Athena launched into space finally received a good angle around the Covenant Corvette they were sheltering behind. They were once again able to get a good visual of the increasingly sporadic damaged ship, as well as the slew of non-combat vessels taking refuge behind the Covenant Super Carrier. Those ships looked like tiny ants compared to the massive juggernaut. But then, so did everything.

"Captain?" Ensign Duran asked again when Miles failed to reply.

Snap out of it, Miles chided himself. Now was not the time to get lost in his thoughts - especially at a time when everything seemed to be spiraling out of control. He addressed his nervous crew. "We don't know what happened or what caused the damage to that ship. For now we'll remain behind cover and see what happens. Be ready to enter stealth mode and enter slip space at a moment's notice" he ordered his crew.

"New targeting solutions sir?" Petty Officer Rosa asked. The ship's weapon systems were still locked onto the targets Athena assigned to them when they first entered the system. Miles was determined to stay on the defensive - he had no intentions of getting involved in an alien dispute.

"Maintain current solutions" Miles said. "But we're not going to engage. If they try to attack us, we'll leave immediately. Duran, what is our operatioâ€|"

"Captain!" Rosa said frantically. "More ships are coming through!"

Captain Miles watched horrifyingly as a mass stream of ships began emerging from the machine. These new ships were distinctly different than the other ships in the system, and for a brief moment, Miles was taken aback by the familiarity of the design compared to Covenant ships. Like the Covenant, these new ships had a smooth, almost polished sheen to them - the design very sleek and streamlined. And, just like the Covenant, these ships had no hard-cut edges, but instead organic-like curves. But as Miles studied more closely, he realized that was where the similarities ended. For one, they were far narrower than the more bulbous Covenant ships. Simply put, they were long and skinny. And whereas the Covenant ships had a more aquatic look and feel to them, these ships very much resembled that of an insect - like an angry Wasp ready to strike its prey.

Miles watched as the ships came through the machine - their formation in picture-perfect synchronization. There were 16 ships in total - of two distinct different varieties. As always, Athena gave him the statistics before he even had to ask.

"Captain, 16 unknown ships have entered the system. Their trajectory puts them in obvious pursuit of the wounded ship." She brought up the details on the holo-projector as she continued. "Ten of the ships are 210 meters in length, while the other six are 615 meters from bow to stern. Each ship appears to have some kind of spinal mounted canon under their hulls. Like the other ships they have an unusually high gravity signiturâ€|Captain, their firing!"

The crew watched silently as the sleek ships fired projectiles towards the helpless vessel struggling to get away. Despite the considerable distance between the predators and prey, the projectiles reached their target in an instant. Miles didn't have any data about what was fired, but he could tell it travelled much faster than standard UNSC MACs. The first few projectiles slammed against the desperate ship, causing some kind of visible shield to flare up - bluish in color. Whatever kind of shield technology the ship had, it was much different than UNSC or Covenant shield tech. The ship spun

wildly by the tremendous impact of kinetic energy, unable to keep a steady course. By this time Miles knew the ship was long gone; the next round of projectiles grimly affirming his thoughts. The ship was once again hit, but this time the projectiles penetrated through the shielding, smashing clean through the hull of the ship. Somehow, the ship managed to hold together for just a few seconds longer, before finally exploding in a terrific show of destruction.

Miles had seen enough. "Duran!"

"Stealth systems already engaged sir" Duran replied, not needing to hear the Captains orders.

"The ship's ready to enter Slip-space" Athena said. "What destination shall I set course for Captain?"

"Plot a course for Chi Cheti IV." Miles said. "It's the closest colony to us and it has a strong patrol fleet in orbit." That, and it's far away from Earth. Miles was very much aware that the Cole Protocol was still active. He had no idea if these aliens could follow him through slip-space. He had no idea if they could even travel any effective distance without those transportation machines. But he wasn't chancing anything. The path to Chi Cheti IV was in the opposite direction of Earth, had a noticeable military presence (most colonies did), and it wasn't necessarily important to the UNSC. So if these aliens could follow him through slip-space and decided to attack Chi Cheti, then the UNSC would lose very little as it prepared to respond. Miles hated the thought of putting a colony in danger based solely on its lack of strategic importance, but he was an officer of the UNSC and he knew his duty was first and foremost the protection of Earth.

"We're ready to enter slip-space at your command Captain" Athena said. "Shall I proceed?"

"Can those ships detect us?" he asked.

"They haven't shown any sign of being aware of our presence" Athena replied. "Even before we entered stealth mode, it's likely they thought we were just part of the drifting debris."

"Athena, what kind of weapon was that?" Miles asked.

"It was a mass accelerated projectile of some sort - similar to our MAC guns - however I believe the rounds were accelerated by different means than what we use. Unfortunately I couldn't get a good scan of the material of the projectile due it tremendous speed, but I was still able to calculate its mass based on the speed and energy output upon impact." She replayed the events just witnessed moments ago over the holo. "I estimate that the slugs launched weighed between 18 to 25 kilograms - a peashooter compared to our standard 600 ton rounds. However, what the slugs lack for in mass makes up for in its incredible velocity. Whereas our shipboard MACs shoot rounds at 30 km/second, these weapons launch the projectile at over 4,000 km/second - or nearly 2% the speed of light."

That got Miles' attention. He always considered himself lacking in the physics department but even he knew that if you launched an object - no matter how small - at high enough velocities it could devastate pretty much anything in its path. "Athena, what's the

energy yield of those cannons?"

"Despite the small size of the slugs each projectile is comparable to about 38 kilotons of TNT. In comparison, the standard ship-based MAC yields approximately 65 kilotons."

So, they were roughly half as powerful as a standard MAC. It was comforting to know that they didn't outperform the UNSC main gun - in fact it barely reached half its power. However for all he knew this was one of their weaker weapons in their arsenal. And despite the fact that UNSC MACs were far more powerful, these cannons held a distinct advantage in one area that Miles saw immediately. Range. Because the projectiles travelled at significantly higher speeds, it meant they could be fired at a greater distance - whereas many UNSC ships had to get up close and personal when firing their main guns. Otherwise the opponent could easily dodge the onslaught. So while the MAC's were like a sledge hammer - very powerful even by a glancing blow - it was lacking in that regard. Of course, these cannons still didn't hold a flicker to Super MAC stations. They were capable of firing a 3,000 ton round at 4/10th the speed of light. No known ship - even a Covenant Super Carrier - had ever survived a hit. It was theorized that even if a ship's shields were strong enough to withhold the incredible impact - it would still be completely vaporized by the sheer heat of the excess energy. Super MACs were one of the only few weapons the Covenant came to fear during the war. Miles briefly wondered if these aliens had their own version of a Super MAC.

As Miles thought over the data in his mind he studied the holo-projector closely. The new ships never slowed as they passed the now annihilated ship and relentlessly continued towards the five remaining combat crafts. Again, Miles was at a crossroads. Play it safe and leave - or stay and gather data. If he left now his crew would be safe, but humanity might pay the price later if these aliens attack and the UNSC has too little data on how to defend against this new foe. On the other hand, while remaining in the system presented obvious dangers in itself, it also provided an invaluable opportunity to observe the combat capabilities of these aliens. And what better way to do that than seeing them in action? And if worse came to worse and they were detected, they could simply hightail out of the system in a heartbeat.

Deciding that staying a bit longer was worth the risk, Miles gave his crew new orders. "Send a flash FTL transmission to both HIGHCOM and Chi Cheti." His communications officer nodded in affirmation. "We'll remain hidden and gather as much data as possible before we leave." Miles looked at the holo-projector - the five hopelessly outnumbered combat vessels were now in position and ready to engage the oncoming ships. Miles had to give those aliens credit - they were outnumbered 3 to 1 and were still willing to hold their ground. It was eerily reminiscent of the kinds of battles humanity was forced to fight during the war - and Miles couldn't help but root for the obvious underdogs, despite not knowing anything about the conflict. Not that he had any delusions. He didn't care why they were fighting or which side had the moral high-ground in said dispute. The simple fact was both sides had brought their conflict into human controlled space, and that was something the UNSC would not allow.

One thing was certain though - this day; this battle - would redefine everything humanity and the former covenant species thought they knew

about the galaxy.

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the Turian dreadnaught <em><strong>Majestic Spirits<strong>\_

"Firing vectors are locked. The enemy vessels will be in range in approximately 30 seconds" a sensor operator informed General Fealix.

General Fealix merely nodded in acknowledgment, not allowing fear or nervousness to take him. He prided himself on always maintaining his cool demeanor while in engagements, and learned through years of experience that remaining calm was the best way to avoid rash, perhaps fatal decisions. Of course, in all of his engagements he ever participated in he either enjoyed a clear advantage, or at the very least was evenly matched. Right now he knew he was at a massive disadvantage. Ten Geth Destroyers and six Cruisers versus his own force - two Frigates, two Cruisers, and a single Dreadnaught. He was outnumbered and outgunned. The only way he would have any chance of winning this engagement was by using superior tactics and skill. He had no doubt his crew was skilled enough. Fealix had personally selected every single crewmember under his command, and made sure they received rigorous training to keep up their edge. This battle would be determined by his ability to out-think his opponents.

\_Out-thinking an AI.\_ Fealix mentally scoffed at the thought. Had anyone else said it he would have called them a fool. But he knew that if he failed, every single person in the system would die. The Geth would never take any prisoners or show mercy. The ships could not make a run for it either - the Geth had positioned themselves between them and the Relay, blocking their path. If any ship tried to go through they would need to pass through a barrage of mass accelerators. So fleeing or surrendering was not an option - not that he would even consider it. He was entrusted by the Council to defend the lives of the research teams. He \_had \_to win - or he would die trying.

"Fifteen seconds until we're in range" his sensor operator said, this time nervousness seeping into his voice.

Fealix remembered everything he knew about Geth ship technology. The Council had learned very quickly that the Geth almost exclusively focused on firepower and offensive weaponry - and not much else. Defensive measures were literally the last thing Geth would consider in combat. Unlike organics - the Geth were not concerned about safety, nor did they fear death. The loss of a Cruiser merely meant a loss of resource, and was easily expendable. Because they focused more on offense and gaining numerical advantages, Geth ships packed a lot of firepower, but could be destroyed relatively easily if you could land a good hit on them. Strong yet weak. It was an oddity, but Fealix fully planned on exploiting it. He also knew that the Geth were machines - well, programs would probably be a more accurate description. And as such, they viewed everything through pure logic. If he wanted to win, he would need to be unpredictable - fight in an unconventional way.

"Sir, they're in range."

\_This was it.\_

Fealix activated his Omni-tool and addressed his entire patrol fleet. "Attention Captains. Launch the first salvo and execute your assigned orders. May the spirits guide you." And with that, his fleet sprung into action. Each ship's mass accelerators powered to life, rapidly firing slugs at tremendous speeds in an unrelenting rate. Every two seconds a shot was fired from each ship towards the oncoming Geth fleet - traversing the distance at 1.9% the speed of light. Fealix had explicitly singled out the Geth Destroyers for attack, despite the fact that Cruisers were usually the heart of a combat fleet. The reason was simple - Destroyers were easier to destroy - and right now Fealix's number one concern was thinning out the Geth's numerical advantage. Besides, although the Geth Cruisers had greater firepower, they were still relatively lightly defended compared to other ships of similar tonnage. If he could thin out the numbers to a more acceptable ratio, he had no doubt \_\*Majestic Spirits\* could lay waste to their Cruisers.

In a span of ten seconds, the patrol fleet had fired 25 rounds at the ten Geth Destroyers, 19 of which hit their mark. The Geth shields for the most part took the brunt of the force, but a few managed to punch through to the hull. Out of the ten targeted Destroyers, five were damaged, two mortally wounded, and three were utterly destroyed. Three ships destroyed in the first salvo was satisfactory in Fealix's eyes, and he ordered the next part of his hastily constructed plan to be implemented.

In unison, all five of his ships launched 2/3rds of their Disruptor Torpedoes in a single volley. It was a very unusual move. Anyone who had even a basic understanding of modern ship tactics knew that Disruptor Torpedoes were only used in extremely close range, as their sluggish acceleration made them easy targets for defense lasers. And conventional tactics told him that spending most of your ammunition in a single attack was unwise, but Fealix knew that in this case 'conventional' had to be thrown out of the window. The CIC screen showed hundreds of missiles streaming towards the oncoming fleet - again, only the Destroyers were targeted. The Geth activated their GARDIAN Lasers, destroying a large number of the missiles heading towards them. Fealix wasn't too concerned about the GARDIANS - he knew the Geth wouldn't be able to stop all of them. If even twenty found their mark, it would still do them some serious damage. Besides, the purpose of launching so many missiles at once was not to overwhelm their defense lasers - it was a distraction.

As soon as the missiles left their pods, the patrol fleet did something almost unthinkable in Turian strategy - they broke ranks. Every ship went in a different direction - all of them heading for different parts of the debris field. Although it appeared to be random and scattered movements, in truth each ship's destination was carefully plotted to provide the best cover among the drifting debris, as well as maintain good firing positions among every ship. Fealix knew that if he was going to be victorious, he would need to change the battlefield parameters. It was that age old battle strategy - when you were outnumbered by a superior force, remain nimble and swift. Strike your opponent quickly and then evade before they could respond. Finding cover in the debris field would force the Geth come in close, making their numerical advantage far less relevant.

The Geth choose this moment to start firing their own mass accelerators towards the now scattered patrol fleet. However, unlike the Turians, the Geth's target was not out in the open and heading directly towards them. For one, all of the ships were already on the move in wildly different directions when the Geth began firing, making them harder to hit. Secondly, the amount of shots the Geth were able to get off was severely hampered by the fact that most of their ships were still focused on stopping the hundreds of missiles heading their way. And thirdly, by the time the shots reached their area, three of Fealix's ships were already safely behind the drifting debris. Most of the twenty-nine shots the Geth got off were easily evaded by the patrol fleet, passing harmlessly by. Other shots would have hit had the debris field not been in the way. These rounds smacked against the drifting debris and caused shattered remnants to fly in all directions in an impressive show. However, the ships behind them remained safe from harm. Unfortunately, seven of the rounds did find their mark; and the two ships still not in cover - a Frigate and Cruiser - took the full force of the rounds. Three rounds slammed against the Cruiser in tremendous force, causing its shields to flicker wildly and barely remain active. Although the shields held, extensive damage by the sheer force of the blow was caused along the ship's cargo hold. Still, all things considered, the ship made it out relatively unscathed. Unfortunately, the Frigate was not so lucky. Four rounds pummeled the ship, easily shattering the shields and smashing into the hull. In a matter of seconds the drive core exploded, vaporizing the ship in an instant.

"Dammit!" Fealix yelled. There was nothing worse than losing soldiers under your command. Even as the practical part of his mind told him that only losing a single frigate by this stage of the battle was exceptionally good given the odds, the pain still cut deep. He had handpicked every one of those men and women to serve under him. They were good, honorable Turians who had families awaiting them back home - families that would never see them again. He quickly regained his composure. There would be time for mourning later - or not, if he didn't stay focused.

"Tritus, status report" Fealix asked his Executive Officer.

"The Frigate \*\*Carnixious\*\* has been destroyed. There are no survivors or escape pods launched" Tritus reported. "The Cruiser \*\*Aephus' \*\*shields are operating at 16% and has taken significant damage to its cargo hold. However, their offensive capabilities are still operating at 100%, and four of their five GARDIAN Lasers are still active. All ships are now in position."

"Sir, the Disruptor Torpedoes are just beginning to reach the fleet" his sensor operator informed him, displaying the information on the main CIC screen. The Geth had managed to stop the vast majority of the torpedoes, as Fealix expected, but some still managed to evade the GARDIAN Lasers and find their target. Of the 238 torpedoes launched, 16 managed to hit their mark. Upon impact the torpedoes' warheads exploded - creating random and unstable mass effect fields. These fields would warp the very fabric of space-time in a localized area, causing the target to rip itself apart. This made Disruptor Torpedoes one of the best weapons for nullifying a ship's shields - as their mass-increasing fields made them too massive for kinetic barriers to repulse. The only real downside was their slow acceleration, which made them easy targets to stop. Still, when they

did hit - they hit hard.

The two already severely wounded Destroyers were annihilated instantly when they were struck - their hulls ripped apart by the generating mass effect field. Not long after three more Destroyers followed a similar fate. That left only two Destroyers remaining; both were damaged - one grievously so.

General Fealix re-assessed his current situation. The Geth numbers now stood at six Cruisers and two wounded Destroyers. His own forces now consisted of one Frigate, two Cruisers, and his Dreadnaught. He had managed to cut the Geth forces in half while only losing a single ship - eight Destroyers for a single Frigate. Even Fealix was slightly surprised at what his patrol had just accomplished. Still, this was no time for self-congratulations. The battle was still ongoing, he was still outnumbered two to one, and the Geth fleet was nearing their position. Once they reached the debris field it would become a true ship to ship knife-fight; where skill and cunning were most severely tested.

The true battle was about to begin.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Thanks so much for your support. 900 reviews. Crazy. Writing a space battle was a lot harder than I thought it would be. I hope I kept things true to cannon, and that the sequence made sense.

><strong>

\*\*Anyway, sorry about the delay. But I have a legitimate excuse! MineCraft + Xbox = time not spent writing. As always, review and critique. I want my 1000 reviews people!\*\*

#### 14. Chapter 14: Crossroads part 2

\*\*AN: Sooo sorry about the long wait. College plus work plus a little vacation time - and well, I haven't had much time to write. As for the previous chapter...\*\*

\*\*I got quite a lot of replies about the velocities of the MAC cannons. To be clear, everything I have written concerning numbers was taken from Halo Wikia - which states that standard shipboard MAC Cannons fire at 30,000 meters/sec - or in other words 30km/sec. Now if you believe that info is wrong, take it up with the wikia site.

><strong>

\*\*And THANK YOU for pushing this story over 1,000 reviews. You guys rock!\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>UNSC Corvette <em><strong>Hades Gate<strong>\_

Miles was impressed. Despite near impossible odds, the defending ships managed to outmaneuver the numerically superior attacking fleet, cutting their force in half at minimal losses. Whoever was commanding those ships knew what the hell they were doing. Or at the

very least, executed a hail-mary plan out of desperation and got lucky. Either way, he sure as hell would like to meet this person. Scattering their forces among the debris field was a gutsy move that flew in the face of conventional space warfare. Not that Miles thought that the alien commander had any other real options. The defending ships had to come up with a battlefield game-changer if they had any hopes of winning this engagement. And they did just that. By forcing the hostile ships to come in close, their numerical disadvantage would be far less relevant - especially when the defending ships had cover from debris. They were still at a large disadvantage, but they were no longer in an 'absolute-certain-death' situation they were in a few moments ago. At least now they had a fighting chance in this engagement. But that brought to mind another question that was nagging Miles' thoughts. Why would they choose to engage in the first place? The aliens were obviously interested in the technology here - and although Miles had his suspicions, he couldn't really fault them. Of course they would be interested - humanity would be too if in the same situation. In fact, humanity was doing the same exact thing with ancient Forerunner tech. But would these aliens view this so great a find that they would defend it even against certain death?

Maybe. Whoever this new enemy was, the aliens obviously felt that the technology at Harvest should never fall into their hands. And the more Miles thought about it, the more he agreed. Athena had been monitoring transmissions since they arrived in the system. She couldn't understand any of it, but she could triangulate who sent what and where. And when those 16 ships came through that transportation device, not a single one gave off a transmission. Not a single one tried to communicate with the other alien fleet. They just instantly started firing. Miles had no idea who these aliens were or why the two forces were enemies, but at least the defending fleet had attempted to communicate with him. Hell, they even sent a first contact package. In contrast, these other aliens were here for one reason - the technology. And it was obvious they were going to kill anyone in their path to obtain it.

At the current situation, it was clear that there would be no retreating by either force. The invading fleet seemed to be relentless in its approach, and it was obvious that the defending fleet wasn't going to budge. It would be a fight to the death. And the more Miles thought about, the more he believed it to be in humanity's best interests if the defending fleet won - If nothing else but for the fact that they were a (relatively) known quantity - and were willing to talk. In comparison the invading fleet reminded Miles of the Covenant not just by the design of their ships, but also their demeanor.

An idea had been creeping in the back of Miles' mind ever since these hostile ships had entered the system and destroyed the fleeing ship. It was an insane idea - quite possibly a career ending, court-martial inducing idea. Yet some primal, ancient instinct within him told him it was the right thing to do. The question was; was it worth the risk?

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the Turian dreadnaught <em><strong>Majestic Spirits<strong>\_

"Tritus, what's our situational status?" Fealix said with haste.

"All enemy ships are within immediate close-combat range. Ships \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ and \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ have clear firing vectors on their targets. Sir, it appears that the enemy ships are separating."

\_Good.\_ This was exactly what Fealix was hoping for. By separating their forces, the Geth's combined might would be considerably weakened. Of course, the flip side would be that his forces were also divided - and some of his ships could end up going toe to toe with two or even three ships at once. But where the Geth still had numbers on their side, his ships had a distinct edge in the environment itself. The Disruptor Torpedo distraction afforded his ships time to bunker down behind debris, providing excellent cover while the Geth ships were out in the open. Still, Fealix new that the only thing that was going to save them was good warfare maneuvering.

"Sir" one of his sensor operators reported, "I have their movements tracked on screen." On the CIC screen each of the eight Geth ships were displayed along with a red line showing their trajectory and intended target. \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ was nearest to the Geth ships, which were bearing upon them quickly. "It appears three ships are heading towards \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_. The Cruiser \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ has two ships veering course towards them. One Geth ship is heading towards our last remaining Frigate \_\*\*Edessan\*\*\_. \*\*And two ships are heading towards us."

"They're trying to finish off \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_" Fealix said grimly. "But we're not going to let them. Get Captain Verris on comms."

In seconds Captain Verris of \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ was connected to the CIC, and immediately spoke before Fealix could even get out a word. "General, we're not in a good position" he said in a distressing tone. "Our weapons are operating normally but our shields are barely holding a 16% and we have three Cruisers heading our way. We might be able to take one more round, but after that we'll be finished. What are your orders Sir?"

Fealix looked at the battlefield display. While his ships had the security of cover among the debris, they would have to venture out of safety if they wanted to fire their main cannons. This fight was going to be a balancing act, he realized - as his ships would have to try to acquire good firing solutions on the Geth ships without exposing themselves to too much enemy fire. The situation reminded him of the ancient battle of Ceraphus on his Homeworld nearly two thousand years ago. The nation state of Ceraphais was being invaded by the much larger, much more powerful nation of Terstris. The war came to a crescendo when the capital city Ceraphus was being sieged by a force ten times their size. Yet through sheer cunning and brilliant strategy, Ceraphus forces managed to hold off and eventually defeat the Terstris army. Ceraphus commanders knew they would never win in a straight up fight, so instead they focused on hit and run tactics - inflicting small but critical wounds on Terstris forces, supply lines, and infrastructure. These raids were made up of small yet well trained soldiers who would often vanish before their enemy could respond - eventually earning them the historical title of Spirit Units, which were still used by Turian Special Forces today. After months of the ongoing siege of the city,

the Terstris forces had casualties up to 50 to 60%, while Ceraphus forces only lost roughly 20%. Even after the Terstris army broke through to the outer city limits, they were so weakened from within that they couldn't continue. Their supply lines were either disrupted or destroyed, leaving their army with very little food and water - many of their soldiers starving to death. Their chain of command was continuously changing thanks to the Spirit Unit's assassinations of high ranking commanders - leaving inexperienced officers in command. And most importantly, their fighting spirits were broken. The tiny Ceraphus forces were frustratingly nimble, always vanishing before they could corner them. Eventually the Terstris army had neither the will or means to conquer Ceraphus and retreated back to their borders. It marked the first time in Turian history that warfare was ever fought in such a way. Like the Ceraphus army, Fealix's own ships had the advantages of being well entrenched in the environment, while their opponents were unprotected. And like the Ceraphus he would have to employ a strike and retreat method, hitting their opponent before they could return the favor. "Captain, on my command your ship and \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ will launch your Mass Accelerators on the targets I have assigned." Immediately the information was uploaded to both \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ and \_\*\*Gellix's\*\*\_ CIC, displaying their assigned firing vectors. "Launch two volleys against target three and then retreat back to cover. As \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ has better coverage they will launch four volleys against targets two and five, striking each with two rounds before retreating to safety."

"Yes sir. But I don't think that will take care of them all" Captain Verris said. His voice was one of concern, but in no way did he doubt his General's orders. Fealix knew he was demanding a lot of Captain Verris - ordering his already damaged ship to jump out of safety and into the proverbial fire. The crew of \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ too was putting themselves in danger. Although the Cruiser still had some time before the two Geth ships tracking them reached their area - certainly more time than \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ - they would still draw Mass Accelerator fire while they would be assisting their wounded brethren. Yet even still his Captains were willing to follow his orders without question.

"Just leave that to me" Fealix said simply. As soon as the direct comms were cut he began giving orders to his crew. "Maneuver us out of cover and prepare to lock firing vectors on the three Geth ships tracking \_\*\*Aephus.\*\*\_ After the first volley is launched, we'll take care of any ship still moving."

This brought up an immediate question from Fealix's second in command, executive officer Tritus. "But sir, won't that directly expose us to Mass Accelerator fire among the two Geth Cruisers heading our way?"

"Only briefly" Fealix responded. "Our shields can handle a few hits. However \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ cannot."

Tritus nodded as the crew began implementing the orders. The CIC screen now showed the three Geth ships getting dangerously close to \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_. "Alright, give the orders to engageâ€|now."

In unison both \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ and \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ jumped out of cover, exposing themselves to the enemy's main cannons. The ships wasted no time launching their Mass Accelerators towards the Geth as soon as their firing vectors were locked. The two rounds that \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_-

launched struck target three directly, collapsing its shields and ripping a gaping hole in the ship. Unfortunately, the ship survived the volley, and immediately returned fire. Meanwhile, \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ launched two rounds each at targets two and five. Target two was hit twice near the sensitive engine core, and exploded instantly. Target five took a direct round that drained its shields, but the other round was only a glancing blow, and it managed to shrug it off. However, the force of the blow knocked the ship off target of \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_, and it had to realign itself before it could fire a shot.

"Incoming round towards \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_!" Fealix's sensor operator reported. Fealix unconsciously gripped the rail near the CIC screen. At such close range there was no way the round was going to miss. He wagered a 50/50 chance that \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ would hold - it was in the Spirits hands now. "Sir, firing vectors are locked on targets three and five. Firing on target three first."

Fealix could feel the raw power reverberate through his ship as \_\*\*Majestic Spirit's\*\*\_ main cannon fired of the first round, which was followed two seconds later by the next round launched towards target five. At the same time, the round launched by target three slammed into \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_, completely draining the remainder of its shields and doing more damage to its already ruptured haul. However, the ship still held together, thanks in no small part to last minute clever maneuvering on Captain Verris' part - tilting his ship so that the most heavily armored area took the brunt of the force. Fealix was grateful, but knew that one more hit, and the ship was done for.

As \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ was desperately retreating back into cover, the round launched by \_\*\*Majestic Spirits\*\*\_ smashed into target three, hitting its engine core and instantly vaporizing what was left of the ship. That left just one more ship on \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_' tail - target five. And it seemed the ship had now realigned itself and was preparing to fire. \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ was too far out to reach cover in time, and at this range the Geth ship would not miss. On one of the screens Fealix could see the ship's main cannon begin to light up, indicating it was seconds away from firing. Fealix's grip on the rail tightened more. \_Come on. Come on.\_

Just before the Geth ship's cannon launched, it was struck by the Dreadnaught's round. The already weakened shields could not hope to hold against the fire power of the Dreadnaught's cannon, and exploded just before it got a shot off.

"Sir" Tritus reported. "\_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ is still holding together and has only taken minimal casualties." The crew in the CIC broke into mild cheers and howls, and Fealix's grip on the railed lessened considerably.

"That one was too close" Fealix said in a barely audible tone - more to himself than to anyone in particular. The howls of victory immediately ended as one of the sensor operators reported new information.

"Sir, four Mass Accelerator rounds have been launched towards \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_. And five rounds are coming our way. We're heading into cover now." Fealix had not forgotten that by helping \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ fend off the three Geth ships, his ship and \_\*\*Gellix\*\*\_ had put themselves in direct line of fire from the two ships tracking them

each. As both ships were heading back into cover, they could not get firing vectors from their main cannons, but they could launch their Disruptor Torpedoes as they were retreating.

"Have all ships launch the remainder of their Torpedoes." Fealix commanded. "Tell each Captain to target the ships tracking them. I want \*\*Aephus\*\* to launch its Torpedoes against the ships tracking \*\*Gellix\*\*." Thanks to the counter attack by his ship and \*\*Gellix\*\*, \*\*Aephus\*\* was now free to move from cover and use its main cannon as there were no longer any ships targeting it. "And I want \*\*Aephus\*\* to lock firing vectors on \*\*Gellix's\*\* pursuers."

His crew sprang into action, relaying the orders to the rest of the fleet. All four ships simultaneously launched dozens of Disruptor Torpedoes against their targets. Thankfully the trajectory path of the Torpedoes was programmable, meaning that the Frigate \*\* Edessan \*\* could launch them in the safety of cover. At the same time the Torpedoes were launched, the Mass Accelerator rounds struck the side of \*\*Majestic Spirits\*\*. Four of the rounds pummeled against Fealix's ship, nearly knocking him off his feet and sounding off dozens of alarms. The fifth round hit a floating piece of debris and deflected its trajectory just enough to narrowly miss the ship just before they reached the safety of cover.

Fealix could see that some of his crew were a bit shaken by the blow, but were relatively fine. "Status report, now!"

"Our shields are down to 46%. All weapon systems are operating 100%" Tritus reported.

His ship took a beating but came through relatively unscathed. \*\*Gellix \*\* however was not so lucky. The ship was unable to get into cover in time, and all four rounds hit their mark. The Cruiser's shields weren't as powerful as Fealix's Dreadnaught, but that class of ship had been known to withstand four or even six direct Accelerator rounds on lucky occasions. Unfortunately this was not one of those occasions. The third round shattered the shields, allowing the fourth round to smash into the very sensitive engine core of the ship. Had that last round hit somewhere else, it may have survived. But instead the Cruiser sputtered for a moment, then exploded instantly.

"Damn!" The pain of seeing his soldiers die cut deep into Fealix. This was the third ship he had lost - so many lives ended by these damn machines that were here for reasons only the Spirits knew. Sadness quickly transformed into anger as he silently vowed to make their sacrifice worth it. "I want those ships destroyed" he said to his crew in a low voice, barely containing his fury. "Now!"

Tritus nodded solemnly. "\*\*Aephus\*\* has firing vectors locked. They are authorized to engage."

The two Geth ships that took out \*\*Gellix\*\* began firing their GARDIAN Lasers, taking out dozens of the Torpedoes heading their way. Most were struck down, but at least seven Torpedoes hit between the two. One of the ships could not sustain four hits, and exploded into thousands of pieces. The other ship took three hits, severely damaging its shields, but surviving the onslaught. Not that it did it any good. The crew of \*\*Aephus\*\* was determined to avenge their

fallen brethren - especially with the knowledge that they had died to save them. The two Mass Accelerator rounds fired by \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ pummeled the maimed Geth ship, destroying it instantly. The vengeful victory was bittersweet. There were no howls of victory this time - just a sense of silent mourning that permeated the air.

"Sir" Tritus said. "I have Captain Verris online."

Fealix nodded, and Verris was brought up on the main comms. "Sir, I have bad news. Due to the damage sustained earlier, that last shot caused extreme pressure build-up within our main Accelerator. Sensors are showing multiple pipe bursts and coolant leaks. Our cannon is now inoperable."

Fealix knew what that meant. \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ had spent the remainder of its Torpedoes in the last launch, and their only real effective long range weapon was now offline. They still had their side mounted mini-cannons, but they were too far away from the Geth ships to be of any use. And even if they did get close enough, they would certainly be destroyed instantly, as their shields were down. They could still fire their GARDIAN Lasers, but at such a range they would be little more than a nuisance to the Geth. In short, the ship was basically dead in the water. Fealix sighed. "Understood Captain. You fought well. Make sure your crew is prepared for emergency evac in case the worse comes to pass."

Verris began to protest. "Sir, our mini-cannons are still operatioâ€!"

"You and I both know that if you engage now it will be tantamount to suicide" Fealix cut off. "This isn't a suggestion. Make preparations for evac. That's an order soldier." He then cut Verris from the main comms.

The remaining Geth ships were tirelessly firing their GARDIAN's, mopping up the last bit of Torpedoes launched. As their distance was a bit farther away than \_\*\*Gellix's\*\*\_ pursuers, they managed to destroy every Torpedo without taking a hit. That left just three remaining Geth Cruisers - each untouched and at full strength. On the converse, Fealix had one Frigate; one very damaged and inoperable Cruiser, and his Dreadnaught. Fealix knew that he was out of options. His last remaining Frigate was pinned down by a much more powerful Geth Cruiser. If \_\*\*Edessan\*\*\_ tried to move out of cover and get off a shot, it would almost certainly be destroyed. Fealix's own Dreadnaught was pinned behind cover as well. His ship \_might\_ be able to survive another barrage of Accelerator rounds, but even then he'd be lucky to pick off just one of the Cruisers before being finished by the other ship. \_\*\*Aephus\*\*\_ could do little more than watch; and all of his ships were out of Disruptor Torpedoes.

The situation was bleak, and Fealix was out of options.

\* \* \*

><p>On board the <em><strong>Seloria<strong>\_

Tali and Liara ran through the ship's corridors as fast as they could, desperate to get answers to what was happening. One moment they were analyzing the data from the contact message, the next moment they were told over the intercom that a hostile fleet had

entered the system through the relay. People were rushing past them in every direction as they made their way to the CIC. Liara's mind went into overdrive - trying to decipher exactly what was happening. The first thing that sprang to mind was the most obvious scenario.

\_Were these aliens attacking us?\_ Although they were the most obvious culprit, it didn't really make much sense. If the aliens were hostile then why send a first contact message? Why offer peace, as the message so clearly intended, only to engage in hostilities a few moments later? Given the events over the past day, it just didn't seem likely. Furthermore, the Salarian over the intercom said that the ships came through the relay. If that was true then there was no way it was them. Homens?

No, Liara started thinking of other possibilities. Was it pirates? Mercenaries?

\_Doubtful\_. She knew that even the most well equipped pirate groups would never stand a chance against a battle tested Hierarchy fleet. And any mercenary company that \_could\_ stand a chance wouldn't be stupid enough to try anyways - especially when the Hierarchy made a habit of hiring their companies within the hotly contested border regions of the Traverse. Attacking your main employers was not a wise business decision.

\_Could it be Batarians?\_

The Batarians became the pariahs of the galaxy after they were ousted out of the Citadel government for their illegal seizure of the Asari colony of Esan two centuries ago. That wasn't the sole reason for their ousting, but it was the tipping point. And ever since then the Batarian Hegemony and Citadel Council have been in somewhat of a cold war - although the Batarians never pushed too far, as they knew that if they got into a war with the Council, they would be obliterated. Could they have decided that a war was worth the risk if it meant reaping the benefits of the technology?

Again, doubtful. The Batarians could be described as many things - mostly negative - but they weren't idiots. Any potential gain would be short lived, and Liara doubted they could ever stand up against the combined might of the three council races - even if they could make use of this technology in time. Besides, it was highly unlikely they even knew of this discovery - as the Council was keen on keeping it top secret.

Tali spoke as they were nearing the CIC entrance. "Liara, who do you think is attacking us?" she asked in heavy breaths.

"Your guess is as good as mine." Liara responded. "Maybe Captain Alenna will know more."

"I hope she can give us some damn answers. This whole situation is insane" Tali said as they burst into the CIC room.

\_It was chaos.\_

Everyone in the CIC was frantic - some were typing in their holo-interfaces, desperate to get more information. Others were shouting questions to anyone they thought would have answers. The

Asari sensor operator - Lenora - yelled, gathering everyone's attention. "Goddess. Another Cruiser has been destroyed." This brought more gasps and murmurs from the crew, and Liara's heart sank. If what she was seeing on the screen was accurateâ€œ;

"Goddess, what happened to the other patrol ships?" She looked over to Tali, who shared a worried glance. There were only three ships displayed on the screen - one of them looked badly damaged. She walked over to a rather husky looking Turian sitting worriedly at his console - his eyes fixed on the screen. Liara tapped his shoulder.

"Umm, excuse meâ€œ;

He nearly jumped. "Whaâ€œ! What? What do you want?

"I just want to know what's happening." Liara said. "Where are the rest of the patrol ships?"

"Destroyed" he said simply.

"Destroyed? Goddess, why? What's happening?"

"Can't you tell?" The Turian responded. "We're under attack!"

Liara was getting annoyed at the lack of information she was getting. "I know that" she said hotly. "Who is attacking us?"

"According to what General Fealix told Captain Alenna, it's the damn Geth."

"Geth?" Tali walked up to the two. "What are you talking about? It can't be. The Geth haven't left the Veil in 300 years. There's no way it's them. That's just impossible!" she said, her tone accusatory.

"Impossible huh?" The Turian responded. He gestured towards one of the screens. "See for yourself."

Tali looked at the screen, and instantly recognized the undistinguishable image of a Geth Cruiser. Her knees nearly buckled beneath her, and she suddenly felt faint. Here they were - her most hated enemy - in the very same system, attempting to destroy the patrol fleet. It didn't make any sense. "Butâ€œ!that's impossible" she said, not sure whether to believe her own eyes. "Why are they here?" she asked herself, completely baffled. In three centuries the Geth had never ventured outside the Veil. In fact, the Geth would target and fire upon any ship that got within range - whether it be a spy drone or a lost civilian vessel. It didn't matter to the Geth - they just didn't care. Her people had tried everything in the days following the Geth Rebellions and their exile to find some way to reclaim their Homeworld. They had even tried opening up a diplomatic dialogue with the Geth - despite massive opposition from the Conclave. Yet no matter how many signals were sent - no matter what was said in those transmissions - the Geth would never respond; and often times try to attack the vessels carrying the message. Eventually her people gave up any hope of trying to establish any kind of diplomacy with the accursed programs, and resigned themselves to exile - turning their hope of ever reclaiming the Homeworld into a faint dream. So to see them now - especially hereâ€œ!

Tali realized in an instant how dire the situation was - and not just

because they were facing the very real possibility of death. If the Geth got ahold of this technology - If they developed alternate methods of FTL travelâ€œ It could spell disaster. They could essentially become unstoppable.

"Tali, are you okay?" Liara asked, having just gotten over her own shock of the revelation.

"Liara, the Geth can't be allowed to have this technology" she said in a distressing manner. "Do you understand what will happen if they do?"

"I know, but what are we going to do about it?" Liara shook her head. "We can't exactly fight them."

"I don't know" Tali responded, sounding almost desperate. "But we have to do \_something.\_"

"We just have to trust that the patrol fleet can take care of them" Liara said, hoping to comfort Tali - a maybe even herself.

Tali looked at the main screen again. Half of the original patrol was destroyed, and it appeared that one ship was inoperable. The situation didn't look good. "Keelah" she prayed. "Please help them."

\* \* \*

><p>UNSC Corvette <em><strong>Hades Gate<strong>\_

"Athena. Give me the rundown" Miles said.

"Captain, the defending fleet managed to destroy five more of the invading ships, while losing one of their own. Out of the sixteen original ships of the invading fleet, only three are left. The defending group also has three ships left, although I think one is out of commission" Athena reported.

"Out of commission? How so?" Miles asked.

Athena brought up detailed images of the damaged ship on the holo-projector. "As you can see, there is a large rupture on the main cannon of the ship. I am also detecting side doors opening up in what is likely the cargo bay. If I had to guess, I would say they are likely preparing for emergency evacuations."

Miles reviewed the data in his mind. So, in reality it now stood at two ships versus three. And from the situation, it was apparent that the defending fleet was out of ideas. Both ships were pinned down - unable to move without drawing fire. And based on what he had seen from their shield strength - which based on the data seemed considerably weaker than UNSC and URS shield tech - he figured a volley launched at either ship could potentially be enough to destroy them. Neither ship could move. Neither ship could assist the other. And the enemy was closing in fast. The defending ships made a valiant effort, but it seemed that it wasn't going to be enough. Unlessâ€œ

"It's a shame" Ensign Duran said, breaking the silence. "These guys put up one hell of a fight." There were quite murmurs of agreement

among the crew. Ensign turned towards Miles expectantly.

Miles knew that look. "I'm insulted you're even entertaining the idea. The answer is no."

Duran seemed unfazed. "Sir, with all due respect, I've been under your command long enough to know that you're thinking the same thing yourself."

"It doesn't matter what I want Lieutenant" Miles said. "What matters are the facts. We can't just delve into a situation we know nothing about. Our actions will reflect on humanity as a whole." Miles was expecting Duran to press further, at which point he would have ordered the Ensign to drop the subject or face insubordination. But to his surprise, it was Petty Officer Rosa that responded.

"But Sir, if that's true then \_shouldn't \_we help them." Rosa said. "What would it say about us if we just sat here and watched as they were destroyed? If we helped them, wouldn't they be grateful? Besides, they already attempted to make peaceful contact. These other guys haven't." She looked back at the screen. "Something in my gut tells me we don't want those ships anywhere near our technology."

"Plus, there are civilian vessels in danger" Duran added in.

Miles was already well aware of these facts. In fact he had been silently mulling over the situation for some time now. He knew that he could very easily mop up the rest of those ships. But doing so would have consequences - like making an enemy of this new foe. However, doing nothing would have consequences as well. What would happen if this invading fleet took over the system? Would they try to make contact like the other aliens? Miles doubted it. If they were willing to fight for the UNSC tech, no amount of diplomacy would remove them from the system. And then the UNSC would probably have to fight them anyway. And what about those civilian crafts? Was there any real doubt as to what would become of them if the defending ships lost?

The entire crew was looking at Miles, waiting to see what his next orders would be. He turned towards the holo-projector. "Athena, what do you believe the chances are that the defending fleet will win?"

"Based on the dataâ€|11%" Athena replied.

Miles sighed. "Shit, why not. Prepare to exit stealth mode and ready offensive weaponry. And if we all get court-martialed for this, I'm blaming you Duran."

Duran smiled as he locked in new firing solutions.

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the Turian dreadnaught <em><strong>Majestic Spirits<strong>\_

"Sir" Tritus reported. "The Geth Cruiser is closing in on the Frigate \_\*\*Edessan \*\*\_fast."

Fealix could see on the screen that the ship was quickly making its way past the debris that \*\*Edessan\*\* was using for cover. He knew that once it got close enough, the frigate would be finished. It would never win in a straight one on one fight against the Cruiser. He knew what had to be done to save the frigate. He would need to bring his Dreadnaught out of cover and use its Mass Accelerators to pick off the ship. But he also knew that \*\*Majestic Spirits\*\* would draw considerable fire from the two ships tracking him. If his ship couldn't take the punishment, he and his crew would die. And if that happened, \*\*Edessan \*\*would soon follow. On the other hand, if he chose to stay put, \*\*Edessan\*\* would quickly be destroyed, and then he would have three ships converging upon him. It was a losing situation no matter how he looked at it.

But the choice really wasn't a choice, because he already knew what he was going to do. Because he was a Turian - and everything in his blood told him to never abandon his fellow soldiers. "Tritus" Fealix said in a solemn voice. "Take us out of cover and target the Geth Cruiser tracking \*\*Edessan\*\*." There was a short pause - a lingering moment of silence as everyone in the CIC understood that this may well be their final moments.

"Understood General" was all Tritus said in return, and his crew went into action - executing their assigned orders without question. His ship changed direction and set course for \*\*Edessan's \*\*position - leaving the safety of cover. As soon as the ship got a good firing vector, the main cannon pumped out three slugs towards the single Geth Cruiser.

Three rounds were launched, and three rounds were all it took to take out the ship - saving the \*\*Edessan \*\*from certain death. Next came the moment everyone was grimly waiting for. "Sir, four Mass Accelerators are heading towards us. Brace for impact!"

The rounds slammed into the Dreadnaught with devastating force, knocking everyone off their feet. Fealix was rather slow to get up, putting his hand over a gash on his left face plate. "Tritus, what's our status."

Tritus listed off the information forwarded to his omni-tool as quickly as possible, despite being banged up. "Sir, our shields are completely drained and we have multiple ruptures within our haul. Most of it is minimal damage, but one round struck near the engineering deck." He looked at Fealix grimly. "Our cannon is inoperable."

So this was it. There was literally nothing he could do to prevent the inevitable. His ship had nothing more but a few side mounted mini-cannons that were useless against the Geth Cruisers. And \*\*Edessan\*\* would never get a firing vector in time to save them. The silence in the room was palpable - everyone knew this was the end. Fealix looked at the CIC screen - the cannons of the last two Geth Cruisers were once again lighting up, indicating they were about to fire.

This is it.

"Men" Fealix said. "I am honored to have commanded you. May the Spirits guide you through the journey into the next life." He then closed his eyes and waited for death to take him.

\* \* \*

><p>The two ship's cannons were nearly charged and ready to fire. However, seconds before they launched the Mass Accelerators that would have finished off the wounded Dreadnaught, a strange blue stream came out of seemingly nowhere and slammed into one of the ships. The resulting explosion lit up the surrounding space in a blinding bluish haze, and the ship simply disintegrated into thousands of pieces. This was followed a few seconds later by another stream of blinding blue light. The last ship tried desperately to avoid the fiery blue mass, but couldn't. And like the ship before, it was vaporized instantly - its shields not even slowing down the infernal mass.</p>

"Captain" Athena said. "Both Plasma Torpedoes have hit their mark. All hostile ships are destroyed."

Miles merely nodded. He was pleased to see that those shields didn't stand a chance against Plasma based weaponry.

The room was filled with silence, until Ensign Duran turned from his screen to face Miles. "Well, now what?"

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the Turian dreadnaught <em><strong>Majestic Spirits<strong>\_

Fealix waited for death to take him - but it never came. He slowly opened his eyes, and was greeted by a shocked crew staring at the main CIC screen. The display showed the remnants of the last two Geth ships each shattered into thousands of pieces across the abyss of space. Fealix could hardly believe his eyes.

"Sir!" Tritus managed to utter after a seemingly eternity of silence. "I don't believe. The Geth ships, they're destroyed. Both of them."

"How is this possible?" Fealix asked.

"I have no idea, there's no other!"

"Sir!" his sensor operator yelled. "You're not going to believe this. I'm picking up a new contact."

"Is it friendly?" Fealix asked.

"I guess you can say that." The sensor operator replied. He brought up an image on the main screen, and what Fealix saw so shocked him that he could only manage to utter one word.

"\_Unbelievable.\_"

For on the screen, drifting just a few dozen kilometers away from the destroyed Geth ships, was the sleek alien stealth vessel.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: Oh man, this chapter was by FAR the hardest to write.

I hope I did the space battle justice. I wanted to make it more based on ship maneuvering than simply 'who has the bigger gun'. And as always, thanks for reading.<strong>

\*\*(And about the Batarians - I am aware that in the game they were citadel member until humans pushed them out. It's one of the things I changed from cannon - similar to my other story.)

><strong>

## 15. Chapter 15: Decisions

Michael took deep, deliberate breaths as he surveyed the surroundings - not an easy task given the amount of snowfall they were receiving. He and his Sangheili companion laid stomach flat - fully cloaked - on the edge of a depression on the low mountain side, overlooking the enemy encampment. Fortunately his Mark VIII power suit easily compensated for the extreme cold, but visibility was still very much an issue. Activating his visor's infrared sensors, he zoomed in on the base below, detecting dozens of soldiers within the fenced off area. Some were patrolling the perimeter, while others were perched up high on the two guard towers, ready to reign down heavy fire on any unauthorized individual who dared to come near. Still more guarded the entrances and the main building complex. Michael's task was clear - infiltrate the rebel base, hack into the central complex's main server and steal sensitive enemy data. The mission was yet another training exercise for the newly formed N7 unit. But unlike the previous exercises, their targets were using real weapons with live ammunition, while his unit was still using non-lethal training weapons - yet adding another challenge for the entire team.

\_Team.\_ \_That would be a stretch,\_ Michael thought.

No, this wasn't yet quite a team, as the first few exercises proved. Michael had run into various problems while coordinating his unit through the battlefield. Everyone had their own ways of doing things, and were reluctant to change their accepted tactics - particularly the Sangheili who, save for Stramus S'lорai, balked at taking orders from a human. Still, if nothing else, necessity to achieve the mission had coerced the N7 unit into a semi-cohesive fighting force. Michael had spent the past week learning how everyone fought, what they were best at, and how he could use their talents to benefit the team as a whole. Everyone was still new, and all were feeling each other out. Again, not quite a team, but at least they were making progress.

Stowing away such musings, Michael focused on the current objective. Everyone was in place, ready to strike at his command. The foulmouthed Unggoy Yaypa, with the help of Stramus, had carefully rigged the nearby comms satellite dish with his own hastily created explosives - ready to cut off the encampment from calling in re-enforcements at the push of a button. While the team was issued basic bomb tech equipment, calling it 'explosives' was about as accurate as calling a house cat a lion. Although HIGH Command wanted to make the battle scenario as real as possible, they didn't want anyone killed in the training. So the 'explosives' they were given had all the firepower of a standard flash bomb, much to Yaypa's chagrin. Of course, Yaypa was having none of it, and created his own explosives by stripping a nearby parked Warthog of its energy cells,

and then wired two flash bangs - one to the energy cells, another to a super coolant used for Plasma weapons - so that the hot and cold components would fuse, setting off an explosion roughly equivalent to a cluster of plasma grenades.

During the same time, he had his top three precision shooters - a human, Sangheili, and an Unggoy - take up sniping positions around the base, ensuring that the enemy would be surrounded by continuous sniper fire in all directions. The rest of the remaining team - a spec-ops Unggoy, an elite ODST veteran, a Sangheili Major, and the Mgalekgolo brothers - were silently waiting just outside the tree line near the base. It had taken the entire night for his team to get in position while staying undetected.

"This is taking too long" Michael's Sangheili companion - Vallio R'bellum - complained. "Everyone is ready. If you are too afraid to take risks, perhaps you shouldn't be in command \_human\_." He said the last word as if it was an insult.

Michael's second in command was a capable warrior who had years of experience in every type of engagement one could imagine. He was an excellent tactician and squad leader who greatly commanded the respect of his fellow Sangheili warriors. Unfortunately, while his skills were an incredible asset to the team, he was a mind-numbing pain to work with. He hated humans, and he wasn't afraid to show it. Michael didn't care. As far as he was concerned, as long as Vallio did his job - and did exactly what he was ordered to do - he could think however he liked.

"I told you" Michael said, "no one makes a move until the enemy officers are in sight." He glared at Vallio, even though he knew the expression was hidden behind his visor. "And don't question my orders again, or I'll kick you off the team for insubordination. Is that clear?"

Vallio stared back with the same intense glare, but said nothing. He may have hated humans, but he was still a Sangheili, and he still followed orders. He gave a short snort before turning back to look through his Type-51 Carbine scope. He surveyed the base for a few moments before speaking again. "In my professional opinion commander, we have limited time left. The sun will be breaking soon, and if we wait any longer, it will increase the chance of jeopardizing the mission."

Michael was well aware of the limited time the team had. As with every infiltration mission, night was always the best time to strike. "I know" he responded. "And I said we wait." Vallio's body tensed, but once again he said nothing. Satisfied that the Sangheili got the point, Michael turned off his external speaker. "Aris, give me a sit rep."

The AI immediately relayed a 3 dimensional map of the area to Michael's visor. "Everyone is in position and check green. Stramus and Yappa have successfully planted explosives on the comms satellite dish, and the snipers are in good defensive positions here, here, and here" she highlighted around the camp. Michael was still slightly taken aback at how the voice of the AI seemed to come from his head. It was a strange sensation he found difficult to describe - like a gentle coolness that soothed the back of his brain. It was an oddity, but one he would need to learn to get used to.

"Commander" a voice chimed in his comms. Michael instantly recognized the voice of David, his elite sniper specialist. "Three individuals have just exited the building complex. I think we may be in luck."

"Hold on." Michael was about to ask Aris to bring up David's scope screen on his visor, but found that the AI had already done so without needing to be asked. It was a bit unnerving - as if the AI could read his thoughts and knew he was going to ask. Or maybe she was just assuming the logical course of action, and acted upon it. Either way, Michael put his discomfort at the back of his mind.

"Aris, can you get a facial scan of the individuals?"

"One moment. Scanningâ€|Yes, these two individuals" she highlighted the targets, and subsequently sent the information to the snipers "are the first and second in command."

Michael was elated. Finally. "Snipers, you get that?" he asked in his comms.

"Affirmative" one said.

"Target in sight" another said.

Michael switched his comms to address the entire team. "Alright, everyone knows what to do. Remember, this is real. They have real guns. Don't hesitate. Don't make mistakes. On my command, be ready to engage." He received a throng of conformations from his team. Next to him, Vallio had stiffened, readying himself to battle. "Snipers, engage now!"

In unison the three snipers positioned around the camp fired off as one, instantly striking down the high ranking officers. The force would have normally killed them had their weapons been real. Instead, as soon as they were hit, their armor locked into place, preventing them from moving. With three well placed shots, the chain of command would already be in disarray. Very quickly, before the alarms could sound off, they moved onto the next, and most dangerous, threat - the guard towers. With quick and accurate precision, the three snipers felled what enemy soldiers they could, but could not take down all of them.

"By the Gods I hate these mockery of weapons" the Sangheili sniper said through comms. "These training weapons can't punch through the re-enforced molecular fiber-glass. Unless the rest of the tower guards pop their heads out we can't get them."

"Just keep them bogged down in cover" Michael ordered. "We'll handle the enemies on the ground." By this time the entire encampment had been alerted. "Stramus, are there any combatants near the comms dish?"

"Negative Commander" she replied curtly.

Good. Michael had explicitly warned Yappa that he was not to detonate the bomb if there was a chance a nearby soldier could get hurt. This was, after all, still just a training mission. "Alright Yappa, take out that satellite dish!"

"With pleasure" the Unggoy said with glee.

Yaypa remotely activated the jury-rigged bomb, and an instant later a great bluish explosion lit up the surrounding area, shredding the satellite dish into thousands of bits. The sound was deafening even from where Michael was perched. The explosion only added to the profound confusion the enemy found itself in. Many of the soldier began firing in every which direction, trying to pinpoint where the sniper fire was coming from. Phase one had gone quite smoothly - it was now time for phase two. "Blue team" Michael addressed the five members waiting within the tree line by the front of the base.

"Advance forward. Shinto and Shozo" he addressed the hunters. "Flank the group on the left and right to provide cover. Your armor can take the heat. Everyone else, don't stop running until you've reached the entrance to the main complex. There's no cover until you reach it so keep running and keep firing. Now go!"

Blue team dashed out of the tree line and advanced forward. Even from where he laid, Michael could almost feel the thumps of the hunter brothers as they rushed forward - the tank-like beasts surprisingly quick for their size. Upon reaching the front gate of the base one of the hunter brothers smashed through, breaking the re-enforced steel locks. Blue team continued through the open courtyard towards the main complex, firing at any available target while the snipers laid down suppression fire to keep the enemy in cover. Michael again activated his comms. "Stramus, Yaypa, head for the encampments back entrance. Vallio and I will meet you there. While everyone is focused on the fighting in the front we'll sneak in behind."

"We're on our way" Stramus said. "Heading out now."

"Let's go" Michael said simply. He and Vallio immediately dashed out of their perched position, running down the hill at full sprint. Michael had to get used to being able to run near twice his speed thanks to his suits capabilities. In fact, he had to get used to a lot of new things. He was now faster, stronger, and more aware of his senses and surroundings when he was in armor. It was a liberating feeling, one that he didn't relish leaving. In just less than a week of training the suit felt like a second skin to him - like another extension of his body. So much so, that he actually hated taking it off after training. He was actually itching for some real action - to see what the suit was truly capable of. But for now, training would have to do.

Michael reached the bottom of the hill and quickly joined Stramus and Yaypa, who were in cover behind a ground vehicle just outside the back entrance. It seemed the enemy soldiers were in so much disarray that they had left the back entrance all but unguarded, instead focusing their efforts against the frontal assault. Michael deactivated his cloak as he approached, so not to spook them.

"Ah, glad you could join as commander" Stramus said. She looked around. "Where is Vallio?"

"He's coming." Michael pointed towards the main complex within the fenced base. "It's a straight shot from here. But just like the front entrance there's no cover. We'll have to run across the open courtyard to get in the building."

"Commander" Stramus said. "Thermal images are picking up four

soldiers behind the back door entrance of the center complex."

"Yaypa, do you have any flash bangs on you?" Michael asked.

"If you mean these powerless shit containers" he waved one at Michael. "Then yes."

"Alright, hang on toâ€|"

"Commander" his comms blared, interrupting him. "This is Kellos. Blue team has made it into the front entrance of the command complex. We've secured the main lobby, but we're now bogged down. We're taking fire from both the hallways and from soldiers trying to come through the front entrance."

"Any casualties?" Michael asked.

"Just some superficial injuries. Nothing serious" the Sangheili warrior replied.

"Okay, stay put and hold that position" Michael ordered. "I'm taking the rest of the squad through the back entrance. Let me know if the fire gets too heavy."

"Affirmative" he replied, and then deactivated his comms.

It was at this moment that Vallio arrived to join the three others. Normally the Sangheili probably would have beaten Michael to the location, but Vallio was lacking a high-powered suit - instead donning his spec-ops armor. While Vallio collected himself Michael once again surveyed the surroundings. Dealing with those four guards waiting behind the building's back door wasn't going to be much of a problem, his main concern instead focused on the camp's left guard tower. His snipers were still doing an excellent job of keeping them bogged down in cover, but he could see a blind spot that the guards could exploit. If his team just made a mad dash for the complex, they would get gunned down in the courtyard. Quickly, Michael formulated a plan.

"Yaypa, hand me a flash bang" he said. Yaypa tossed one to him. "Vallio, since you and I are the only ones who have active camouflage, we'll sneak in and head towards that hanger there" he pointed to the hanger closest to the building. "Once we get there we'll provide cover fire against the tower guards so that Stramus and Yaypa can make their way towards the building entrance." He handed Stramus the flash bang. "Stramus, use this toâ€|"

"Stun the guards. Of course. I'm no amateur Commander" she said almost playfully.

He nodded, and then looked at the gate. "Now we need to somehow get through the gate without drawing attentâ€|"

Again, he was interrupted by Stramus, who pulled out her energy sword. She then proceeded to effortlessly cut off the main locking mechanism.

"Oh right." Michael said. "Something told me you wouldn't be using a training blade."

"No one separates a swordsmaster from her blade" she said with a Sangheili equivalent of a smirk.

"See you on the other side" Michael said. He and Vallio then activated their camouflage and went through the gate. Running at full speed, they made it to the hanger and took up positions, going completely undetected by the tower guards, who were still trying to pinpoint the sniper fire. Michael readied his Battle Rifle, and Vallio his Carbine.

"Stramus, Yaya, run!" Immediately the duo jumped from their positions and bolted across the open courtyard. Meanwhile Michael and Vallio were laying down a barrage of fire against the tower guards, keeping them helplessly pinned as their companions made it to the building entrance. Michael wasn't surprised to see the speed at which Stramus ran, but he was surprised to find Yaya right on her tail. Those Unggoy bastards could really run when their life depended on it. Reaching the complex door, Stramus took position to the right, Yaya to the left, before she proceeded to kick it down. She threw the flash bang in and turned back quickly, narrowly evading a barrage of lead as the soldiers inside immediately fired.

She could hear voices on the other side. "Everybody get down!"

The flash bang went off, stunning and blinding the four soldiers inside. Stramus and Yaya rushed in, placing a single easy shot in each of the helpless guards. Stramus activated her comms. "Michael, the hallway's all clear." A few seconds later Michael and Vallio came through the entrance to join them.

"Come on" Michael said as he rushed down the hall, his comrades following him. "Blue team's held up in the main lobby. Let's find the server and get the hell out." He took a right at the first intersection, following Aris likely hypothesis of where the server was based on thermal scans. As they were running they spotted two more guards, both of which were quickly taken down by Michael's and Vallio's rapid fire. They kept running, taking a left and then two more rights, making their way through the labyrinth of hallways. The building layout was atypical of standard interior designs, the reason being it was solely constructed for military training purposes. As such - along with the unusual amount of rooms, hallways, and corridors - it was completely barren. The emptiness gave off an almost eerily aura, compounded by the amount of bullet holes on the walls and ceilings from previous exercises. There were surprisingly few guards, most likely because they were all focuses on blue team in the main lobby.

The group made their way down the last turn, taking down another three guards on their way. As they headed down the long corridor, Michael activated his comms. "Blue team, status report."

The Sangheili squad leader answered with something akin to amusement in his voice. "They just keep lining up commander" Kellos said. "I'm at ten kills already."

"I don't care about your kill count. How's the team doing?" Michael replied, started to feel the first signs of exhaustion swarm over him.

"Nothing but minor wounds. We're holding steady here." Michael could hear some of the squad members in the background and was that laughter he was hearing? "Ha, another one down. I thought this was going to be a challenge" Kellos added.

"Call down the Pelican and hold steady. We're almost at our destination." Michael deactivated his comms, chuckling to himself. "So much for Brass trying to make this exercise realistic by giving our opposition live weapons." he said to Stramus. "It seems the others are having the time of their lives."

"These soldiers live for battle. It's in their blood" Stramus said as they finally reached the server room. The steel door was shut, no doubt locked with heightened security measures. Stramus pulled out her energy blade again; ready to cut out the lock mechanism, as she had with the gate earlier.

"Stramus, wait!" the AI yelled, causing her to halt. "I'm detecting massive electrical buildup on the door. I'm guessing it's rigged to send thousands of volts into anyone who touches it" Aris warned.

Michael picked up a piece of concrete rubble lying on the ground. "Stramus, step back." She did, and Michael threw the rubble at the door. Upon impact the piece of concrete immediately got zapped with ten thousand volts, shattering it into tiny pieces. Michael sighed. "Nice work Aris. That could have been a disaster."

"So what then?" Vallio asked

Yaypa stepped forward, an Unggoy grin on his face. "Amateurs. Allow me." He took out the cartridge containing the plasma coolant in his weapon and placed it by the wall next to the door. He then took out a small rectangular object - which to Michael looked like some kind of lithium battery.

"What are you doing?" Michael asked.

"Energy cell from Warthog" he replied. "Hot, charged liquid from cell mixes with super cold coolant. Particles react. Big boom!" he said with glee as he finished positioning the two objects. He quickly lit the energy cell, which was engulfed in flames instantly. "Um, run!" he yelled while he dashed into the adjacent empty room. The other three looked at each other in bewilderment, and then dashed for cover.

Not a few seconds later the explosion went off, putting a large gaping hole into the steel re-enforced concrete wall. The force knocked Michael and Stramus to the ground, while Vallio's shields drained slightly. "Damn it. Warn us next time!" Michael yelled, helping Stramus stand up.

"I'm beginning to wonder who's more of a threat to us. Our enemies, or Yaypa" Stramus said, steadying herself up.

"I got it open" he said in defense.

"Just keep the hallway secure while I get the data" Michael ordered. He stepped through the shattered hole in the wall, ready to fire at a moment's notice. Thankfully, there were no soldiers, as Michael's

thermal sensors indicated. He quickly spotted the main server, and ran towards it.

"Alright commander, yank me" Aris said. Michael reached at the back of his helmet, opening the slot containing the AI crystal cube. With a quick pull he removed it, and as with other times, instantly felt an unnatural shiver run through his spine - that gentle coolness fading from his brain. "Plug me in the left slot on the server" she said, and Michael did just that.

"How long is this going to take?"

"Done" Aris said. "All information is secure."

Michael quickly unplugged Aris from the server and inserted her back into his helmet, the coolness returning to his body. He activated his comms. "Kelllos, we got what we came for. What's the ETA on the Pelican?"

"It's already here" Kelllos replied. The Pelican had been waiting several clicks from the base, ready to be auto-piloted to the extraction point at a moment's notice. "It's waiting for us at the landing zone in the tree line."

"Head for the LZ, we'll meet you there. Can you guys make it out under the heat?" he asked while he rejoined the others and began making their way back out. Kelllos just chuckled, which Michael took as a yes. He quickly contacted the sniper team. "David, we're heading for the LZ. Focus your suppression fire on the North Guard tower. Blue team should be heading out now. As soon as they're in the clear, pack up and make your way to the extraction point."

"Got it" the sniper replied curtly.

Michael deactivated his comms, and the four unlikely squad members fought their way out of the complex, exiting through the back entrance from which they came, all the while felling more soldiers along the way. It wasn't until fifteen minutes later, when all squad members were accounted for and onboard the Pelican, did Michael let his guard down. Another day, another training mission successfully completed. He was glad that things went better than expected. In fact, it seemed that with each sequential exercise, the team began working more fluently together. But he, like the rest of the team, was beginning to grow weary of the training. He understood it was important - that it was better to learn to fight together in exercises than in real combat. And he understood why the UNSC was very adamant in his training with the MARK VIII suit before allowing him to deploy in it. Still, he knew he was ready for so much more. And as he looked at his myriad squad members - laughing, joking, and comparing kill counts of the mission - he knew that they were ready too.

Michael smiled. Perhaps calling this group of misfits a 'team' wasn't such a stretch after all.

\* \* \*

><p>Six hours later</p>

Michael was a bit drowsy as he neared General Buck's office - getting

only a few hours of sleep since the last training mission. But it was nothing he wasn't used to. Lack of sleep was, after all, a basic part of military life. He was about to give a firm knock when the door suddenly opened.

"Ah, Shepard. Good. Walk with me" the General said.

Michael matched Buck's quick pace. "Something wrong General."

"Something huge has come up. The UNSC is mobilizing its fleets."

Michael raised a brow. "Why Sir? Are we being attacked?"

"No" the General replied. "Something bigger."

Bigger than being attacked? Now Michael was confused. "General, what's happening?" he asked hesitantly.

"The N7 team is being assigned its first mission. Congratulations Commander. As of now your training is officially over." He took right, heading towards the conference room. "You'll be accompanying diplomats on an important mission."

Now Michael was doubly confused. "Sir, that's great butâ€¦diplomatic protection doesn't sound like an N7 job."

Buck finally reached the conference room, opening the door and beckoning Michael in. "It's important. I'll explain more once the rest of your team arrives."

"Can you at least tell me where our destination is?" Michael asked, his curiosity now fully peaked.

"Harvest" the General replied.

\* \* \*

><p>President Pamela 'Pam' Valdez sat at the end of the conference table surrounded by her top advisers and military commanders. The room was eerily silent - the only noise coming from the president as she nonchalantly tapped her pen on the desk, contemplating everything she was told in the debriefing. The people surrounding her - handpicked by the president herself - were among the best humanity had to offer in their respective fields; whether that be in economics, the sciences, philosophy, national security, and most importantly - the art of war. But despite all of the experience and intelligence of the room's current inhabitants, a sense of dread and nervousness was clearly present - and with good reason. If the emergency flash transmissions from UNSC <em><strong>Hades Gate<strong>\_ were accurateâ€¦

It all seemed so surreal - the amount of startling data she had received throughout the day; Contact with another race - no - contact with another galactic civilization, enormous transportation machines, a new FTL system, the space battle between two unknown forces, and the UNSC \*\*Hades Gate's\*\* intervention.

That last tidbit had sparked a long debate about Captain John Miles'

decision to intervene. Some defended him, for a variety of reasons - mainly that this new civilization had attempted peaceful first contact, and that by helping them, it would build trust. Most however, were furious - some even calling for his immediate court marshal for involving the UNSC in an alien dispute. At first Valdez firmly agreed with the later, however one of the Generals had made an excellent point. Those strange attacking ships were hell bent on destroying every ship within the system, for the obvious reason of reaping the technology of the Harvest ruins. That was something no UNSC captain could allow. At least the other group of aliens had stopped their probing of the debris when Miles arrived, and had then attempted to make peaceful contact. It was doubtful the other ships would do such a thing.

Not that the debate of Captain Miles' action really changed anything. For good or ill, he was now the official liaison between this new civilization and the UNSC for the time being. There were now two UNSC vessels in the Epsilon Indi system - Miles' ship, and the UNSC frigate *Alamo* which had just arrived in the system moments after the battle. The *Alamo* was sent from Chi Cheti IV after receiving the emergency transmission from *Hades Gate* - the planetary defense commander deciding to send just one ship as to not instigate anything out of misunderstandings. But, more importantly, the *Alamo* had a Quantum Entanglement Communicator, meaning that they could communicate with any other QEC instantly - something the *Hades Gate* lacked. They could now get live updates on the situation on what was happening.

And the current situation was certainly unique. After those attacking ships were destroyed, soon more ships came through that 'transportation' device - these belonging to the first group of aliens encountered. There were now twelve combat ships from this civilization in the Epsilon Indi system, but none had made a hostile act against the UNSC ships. For now, the alien fleet and two UNSC vessels just drifted in-system - not quite a 'stand-off', but both clearly unsure on how to proceed. Thus far, there had been no other contact attempts.

The next long debate was about whether they should inform the URS - mainly the Sangheili - about the events that had occurred over Harvest. This drew out passionate arguments on both sides - many wanted to keep this a secret as long as possible, so that if successful contact was made, humanity could get an advantage on new alien technology before anyone else. However, in the end the committee's practical side won out. It was decided that the UNSC would include the Sangheili in the next phase of further contact - so that if the aliens tried to invade, they would - by default - also be at war with the URS, ensuring that humanity would not be facing this threat alone. Negotiations were in progress for much of the day with the highest levels of the URS government about a joint contact mission - with humanity's diplomats doing everything to convince the Sangheili that this was a potential threat to them too - as their borders were relatively close to Harvest. It was just a few hours ago that the Sangheili had agreed, promising to send a fleet with their own diplomats alongside humanity - thanks to strong insistence of the Arbiter. As of now, talks were in progress about how official contact will proceed, what ships would be sent, what the fleet size would be, and everything in between.

With that taking place, Pam was now dealing with the issues of

internal security. "What precautions has the UNSC taken so far?" the president asked.

"Just the basics so far, although we're prepared to take drastic measures at a moment's notice" Tsuyoshi Yamamoto - Fleet Admiral of the entire UNSC Navy - said curtly. "I've already authorized two patrol divisions to head for Chi Cheti IV, the closest colony to Harvest. I also recommend raising our defense force alert to the second highest level, just short of war."

Before Pam could respond, her economic advisor - Steven Kenneth - spoke up. "I disagree. We should keep this discreet until we know exactly what we're dealing with. If we raise the alert levels it could cause a panic."

"Panic?" Yamamoto responded with indignation. "I'm more worried about the security of our species. The last time we made contact with an alien civilization, it nearly led to the extinction of humanity. I could care less about public relations."

"Well maybe you should Admiral" Kenneth countered. "If we cause system wide panics, it will seriously hamper our economic output. Your fleets won't be so mighty if we plunge into a recession."

Pam raised her hand before an argument could arise. "The safety of our colonies must come foremost before anything else" she said. "But with that said, Kenneth is right. For now, we must keep this discreet. Admiral, can you heighten the security alert just within the regions surrounding Harvest?"

Yamamoto nodded. "I suppose. But if you want this discreet I don't know what you'll tell the press" he replied. "Harvest is too far away from hostile territory to blame the increased levels on Jackals or Brutes. Only the Sangheili have colonies remotely close."

"We don't have to tell the flesh-eating press anything" the president's national security adviser chimed in.

"They'll be questions" Kenneth said.

"Then let there be questions" he responded. "We don't have to answer them, not until we have more facts. Besides, we can always just push it off as Naval training exercises."

President Valdez nodded. "Raise the alert level in the regions around Harvest" she said, having made up her mind. "And I want more than two patrol divisions in the area. I want entire fleets ready to resist any pre-emanate invasion. Tell the media it's for naval training purposes if you have to."

"Madam President, I have to say that I strongly disagree" Kenneth said.

"Noted" Pam replied. "Now, moving on to the contact mission."

"Yes" Linda, the president's Secretary of Foreign Affairs said. She had just recently returned from the QEC room linking Earth to Sanghelios - the Sangheili homeworld. "Madam President, you've said that you wanted the first official diplomatic meeting to portray the UNSC in a powerful light?"

"That's correct" the president replied. Valdez's administration had taken the unofficial motto that a 20th century American president once used to good effect - '\_Speak softly and carry a big stick.\_' Many had argued that the diplomatic meeting should be small - as not to spook or give off impressions of intimidation towards this new civilization. Valdez adamantly disagreed. Intimidation was damn fine in her book if it meant that these aliens would think twice about attacking. Humanity had tried the other approach last time - and it didn't work out so well. Sure, this time they would still bring diplomats bearing gifts and messages of peace and prosperity, but they'll be doing it with a \_huge fucking fleet\_ backing them up. '\_Trust but verify' - \_another 20th century quote that Valdez had taken a liking to.

"I've just gotten off the QEC with the Arbiter, and he said he agrees with your assessment of the situation. Along with its diplomats, the URS is sending a contingent of three URS Frigates, one Light and one Heavy Destroyer, a single Assault Carrier - and the big chalupa - one of their Super Carriers." Everyone in the room looked at Linda with surprise. "The fleet is heading for Chi Cheti IV as of right now."

"That's quite a show of support." Pam was truly surprised. She knew that the current Arbiter - son of the former Arbiter Thel 'Vadam - had been gracious in his efforts to build bridges between the URS and humanity, despite facing strong opposition from many of his own kind. But she never expected to achieve this level of support. "Make sure the command on Chi Cheti IV is prepared for their arrival. The last thing I want is a major diplomatic incident with the URS."

"Of course Madam President. I've already notified the Planetary Defense Admiral in the system" Linda replied.

Admiral Yamamoto, who had been silently thinking to himself, chose this moment to speak. "Madam President, if I may?"

"Yes Admiral?" the president asked.

"If the idea here is to make these aliens think twice about attacking, then why not go all the way?

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what better way to show our strength than bringing our most powerful ship with the diplomatic defense fleet" he said, his voice stern. The room instantly fell silent.

"Admiral, surely you can't be speaking of \_that \_ship" the president said incredulously. His serious face was an answer in itself.

The president's national security adviser chuckled. "Admiral, we want to create an image of power, not wipe them out. You can't possibly be suggesting it."

"Why is it so insane?" the Admiral asked. "We've found that ship 18 years ago, and since then it's just been orbiting over Concord collecting space dust. It's the most powerful ship we've ever had, and yet we've hardly even used it."

"And there's a reason for that" Kenneth countered. "We're still not completely sure how the thing operates, even after nearly two decades of reverse engineering."

"We know how to move it. We know how to fire its main armament. And as per the Sellik treaty, it has URS members operating on it," Yamamoto said in defense.

The Sellik treaty - Pam was well aware of it. When the location of the ship was discovered by translating recovered Forerunner data, the UNSC was elated - having found one of the most significant discoveries since the Halo Rings. But it also set off a diplomatic incident - to put it mildly - with the URS. The Sangheili were so fearful of this sudden power flux towards humanity that they demanded the ship be shared between the two governments. Some in the URS even claimed that if the UNSC didn't cooperate, they would use force to destroy the ship. 'Share it or lose it' was the URS' basic message. Before tensions could arise further however, a compromise was made. The ship would still officially be part of the UNSC navy, yet would have URS personnel jointly operating it with the UNSC. In this way, it would relieve any potential fears of the UNSC using it against URS forces.

"It's the perfect ship for the job" Admiral Yamamoto continued. "It's jointly operated with the URS, thus providing a unified front. And it'll give an image of power and strength like no other. If these aliens have any intentions of invading our space, then I can assure this ship will change their mind."

Again, silence in the room - save for the pen tapping of the president, as she often did while in deep thought. Kenneth spoke up, breaking the silence. "Madam President, you can't possibly be consideriâ€!"

Pam put her hand up, stopping Kenneth mid-sentence. "Admiral Yamamoto, get me in contact with Admiral Steven Hackett." She locked eyes with Kenneth, who looked peeved. "I'm sorry Kenny, but I'm not taking any chances here."

The president had come to a decision. She was going to send the gargantuan 50 kilometer Forerunner Fortress Ship - UNSC Light of Sol - as the flagship of the first contact fleet.

## 16. Chapter 16: Only Time

### \*\*Tyrogg System\*\*

In war, it's the small things that have the most impact on a soldier. No matter how grand the scale, noble the cause, or horrific the slaughter, it's the personal connections - and loses - that truly count. Sentient beings may claim to weep for the horrific devastation and tremendous death toll of war, but the truth is those things are just meaningless statistics. One hundred dead, ten thousand, one billionâ€!these are just abstract numbers to an individual that, while sad, have no personal connection. But if a friend, family member, or lover dies, then that one death alone will mean more than the billion other lives lost.

Today, General Fealix lost a lot of good friends.

"Tritus, give me the casualty report."

Tritus listed the numbers from his Omni-tool. "On our side of the Relay - 112 dead, 38 wounded and 14 critical." There was a strange mix of somberness and anger within the CIC. No one said a word. "On the other end, the casualties are much worse I'm afraid. The entire 14 ship battle group was wiped out in the surprise Geth attack. The initial Geth fleet consisted of 32 ships, which the 345th Patrol managed to cut in half before being destroyed. Roughly 94% of the Patrol's crew, 264 soldiers, was killed. The rest managed to escape in evac pods."

\_This wouldn't have happened if the Council had taken my advice.\_

"Do we have intel of any additional Geth movements?" Fealix asked.

"No Sir. Reports from STG sources didn't show any significant change within Geth monitored space. A large scale invasion by the Geth doesn't seem to be materializing. Or even a follow-up attack for that matter."

Fealix kept playing every possible scenario and motive in his head on not only why the Geth would attack like this, but also on the way that they preceded. For a start, the fact that the Geth knew about the Tyrogg system was troubling to begin with. Although to be honest, he couldn't say he was terribly surprised. The Council and CEC had withheld the knowledge of this place to the exploratory team until the absolute latest possible moment. But given the scale and nature of this expedition - and the sheer amount of resources and personnel needed - leaks were bound to happen. What really had Fealix in turns was why the Geth, after centuries of seclusion, decided to attack over these ruins. Yes, the technology here is substantial, but the Geth had never been interested in the universe beyond their own space. And even if they had decided that this technology was worth breaking their isolation, then why attack the way they did? For this kind of occupied invasion attempt, their numbers were pitifully small. Not only would they have needed to capture the two systems on each end of the Relays, but they would also need to have the necessary forces for continued occupation and to repel enemy reinforcements. After all, they had to know that they'd face stiff resistance. And they had to know that even if they did succeed in taking the system, then their numbers would be too low to hold it from Council retaliation. And that doesn't even include the fact that they would be cut off from any of their supply lines.

For rational, logic driven machines, they sure weren't making a whole lot of sense.

"Sir, the Salarian professor is trying to contact you. He says he has more information about the attack" Tritus said.

"Link him to my Omni-tool." A Salarian scientist with a half-missing right horn soon appeared on Fealix's Omni-tool screen. "Professor Solus, I hope you have more intel for me. I'll take all I can get."

"Yes. Recovery team has salvaged many data terminals and computer

banks." When additional Council support finally made it to the Tyrogg System, the Council forces, with the help of Doctor Mordin Solus, began recovering some Geth ship debris with the hope of finding additional intel. "Most of the data was purged, but we got lucky with one of the ship's NAV system. We have the Geth patrol's plotted course."

Now we're getting somewhere. "Well that's good to hear, because I'd like to know how in the Spirits did we not see this coming" Fealix said, a hint of frustration rising in his voice. "The Geth would have had to pass through Relay's in the Attican Traverse \_and\_ Turian Space to get to this system."

"The Geth didn't go through the most direct route from the Perseus Veil" Mordin replied. "The data suggest that the Geth skirted through very indirect but unmonitored Relays in the Traverse until they reached the edge of Turian space, and then traveled to Relay 314 by traditional FTL travel."

"They didn't get to 314 by going through 264? Fealix asked, perplexed.

"No."

Another thought quickly emerged to Fealix. "Wait, you said they travelled by traditional FTL. How long did this journey of theirs take?"

"Approximately four weeks" Mordin said matter-of-factly.

"Four weeks? But Captain T'Velos only found this place three weeks ago. That would mean—"

"That they knew of this place \_before\_ we did" Mordin finished.

Now \_that\_ was troubling. Fealix was silent for a moment, thinking of what this stunning revelation meant. It answered a few lingering questions, like why the Geth attacked the way they did. Perhaps they didn't know that \_we\_ knew of this place, and weren't expecting a full battle group awaiting them. That would make sense. If they thought the system would be abandoned as it had been for some time now, then all they would need to do is send enough ships to salvage as much as they could before journeying back. Running into Council forces was probably as much a shock to them as it was for us. Of course, if Fealix was in the same position as the Geth, he would have ordered a retreat as soon as he came in contact with the enemy at Relay 314. He certainly wouldn't go head-on into an unknown environment and hope for the best. But he also had to remember that he was organic, and these were machines. "In fact, there not even that. They're just programs." They probably assumed that now would be the best time to strike, as the Council would only strengthen their position from this point in time. Especially after a Geth patrol fleet was spotted. Or maybe they decided that if the Council was already here, they would never get another chance to recover any of the technology. And so hoped that whatever ships were left after the fight would be able to salvage as much as possible before fleeing back to Geth space. It would mean deliberately sacrificing their own for extremely long shot odds. But again, these were synthetics, not organics. "Synthetics don't value life."

But although this may explain why the Geth seemed so unprepared and under-strength, it opened up a plethora of more troubling questions. \_How did they know of this place before we did? Did they discover other, similar ruins like this one before? T'Velos and the Geth couldn't have found this place at roughly the same time by accident, could they?\_ It was way beyond coincidence. Fealix never believed in coincidences.

"I have to say Professor, this is very unexpected" Fealix said.

"Yes. Unexpected. Geth operations and intelligence network more widespread than assumed. Perhaps not as reclusive as we thought" the Salarian answered in his species' commonly speedy dialogue.

"Is there anything else we should know about the Geth? Fealix asked."

"Still searching. But as I said, most data was purged."

Fealix filed this away and moved on to the next big \_Nathak \_staring them in the face. "Anything new about our mysterious new acquaintances?" Less than an hour after the last Geth ship was destroyed, another alien vessel emerged in the system by way of physics defying \_weirdness\_. This one, measuring 480 meters, was much larger and obviously more heavily armed. The Cruiser-sized vessel, now drifting near the smaller stealth ship, had no detectable element zero. Like many ships of this species, the design was bulky and angular, with a large forward mounted spinal cannon running an estimated two-thirds of the ship. There were multiple point defense turrets and other instrumentation that Fealix couldn't identify. The ship looked strikingly like an infantry assault rifle. A giant, space-sized assault rifle. "Has there been any communications?"

"Very limited. A few communications have been sent in native tongues but nothing either side could understand. They're obviously communicating to superiors by the simple fact that this second ship is here. But how they're doing it is a mystery. We're detecting no element zero. Fascinating." The professor was obviously excited with the thrill of new discovery. Fealix couldn't blame him, he as a scientist after all. But his major concern was security. He appreciated the help offered by these unknowns. After all if it wasn't for their intervention he'd be dead. But he was still weary. Helpful or not, they were still a potential threat. The enemy with unknown capabilities is always the most dangerous.

And there were too many unknowns about these people.

"Do you think they have worlds close to here?" Fealix asked.

"Impossible to tell. Without the knowledge of how fast their FTL system is, we can't assume anything."

But only two of their ships are here. Their two to our twelve. Fealix couldn't read too much into that. For all he knew there was an entire fleet of giant ships heading this way. This begged another inquiry. "Professor, the scale-size of these ship are baffling too me."

"You mean why are some of them so large? I theorize it has to do with the different methods of FTL travel" Mordin explained. "The largest most of our ships get are usually around a thousand meters. Some ships like the \_\*\*Destiny Ascension\*\*\_ may be a bit bigger. Do you know why?"

"Energy requirements" Fealix replied.

"Exactly. It takes tremendous power to envelope large objects in a mass effect field. Ships sizes have always been limited on how efficiently our engines utilize element zero. The more mass, the more energy needed to move it. To move ships any larger than the \_\*\*Destiny Ascension\*\*\_ is not impossible. But it's simply impractical. Especially for warships. We have the resources to build extremely large ships, but no efficient way to create a mass effect field around it for an extended length of time. In this way we are limited."

"But they don't have that limitation" Fealix said. "They could build as large as they want."

"Not necessarily. Their method has to use tremendous energy as well. Except their energy to mass ratio is obviously much larger than ours. Or they simply have very efficient engines. Either way, eventually they'll face the same dilemma we do. They just face it at a much larger scale."

Like 27 kilometers larger. Every time he looked at that unholy massive ship, a wave of anxiety swept over him. What must it have been like to be on the receiving end of that thing? He didn't know how powerful the ship weaponry was. Size didn't necessarily mean better technology. But Fealix was convinced that it could have pulverized a Turian Dreadnaught just by ramming into it. It was a sobering thought. Speaking of weaponryâ€¦

"The weapon system utilized against the Geth. What have you discovered?" Fealix had watched the recordings a dozen times by now. The projectile - if he could call it that - looked like a giant bluish-white fireball. Whatever that stealth ship used, it got passed the Geth shields with relative ease. It also had tracking capabilities, and was incredibly hot. It simply melted right through the Geth hull.

"Scans indicate it's some form of plasma weaponry" Mordin explained. "It's likely they superheat a bolt of plasma and then launch it against their target."

"How do you launch plasma?" Fealix asked.

"Magnetically. And if my hypothesis is correct, that's how they control it too. Controlling the flow and shape of plasma with magnetic fields is relative easy. In fact we do it all the time for all manner of reasons. We've even made weapons systems out of them. But never on scale to a starship. Mass Effect cannons have always been the foremost focus of our ship-based weaponry instead."

This was what was most confusing to Fealix. "That's what I don't get. Why don't they use mass effect technology like every other race? It's as if these people have never known of element zero at

all."

"Have hypothesized myself. Could be that they have not yet discovered element zero. But given that they're spread throughout other systems, it's unlikely. Need more data. Will need to analyze further."

Tritus tapped on Fealix's shoulder. "Sir, we've got an incoming call from Palaven. They want an update."

"I have to go professor. Contact me if you learn any additional information." Fealix released the professor and started for the secure comms room with Tritus at his side. So many galaxy shaking revelations in so short of time was beginning to wear him down. He felt exhausted. Mentally and physically. The death of so many of his brethren lay heavy in his spirit. Even now Council forces were still recovering bodies from the void of space.

Tritus broke the silence as the two headed for the comms room. "Word's getting around about how you defeated the Geth. A lot of higher-ups back home are impressed. There may even be talk of promotion."

"I didn't defeat the Geth. Had it not been for the intervention we would have all died."

"But Sir, you managed to virtually wipe out a force nearly three times your size. Even the best commanders couldn't hold out against such impossible odds. It's commendable."

Commendable? Fealix didn't feel commendable. Not when so many of his soldiers were dead. He felt like a failure. "We lost too many. This is not a victory."

"Sir, we're alive because of you. The civilians on the exploratory teams are alive because of you. I know you might not think it but if it wasn't for your actions we would all be dead. The sacrifices of our brothers and sisters weren't in vain."

Fealix sighed. "I hope your right Tritus." They arrived at the comms room where he would soon be speaking to the highest powers of the Hierarchy. But only time will tell.

\* \* \*

><p>Council Exploratory Vessel <em><strong>Seloria<strong>\_

Tali stood about 14 paces from the entrance to one of the ship's many maintenance shafts, feigning interest in her Omni-tool. It had now been a full day since the Geth attack, and everyone was beginning to calm down, convinced that they weren't going to die at a moment's notice. Things on the ship were beginning to return to normal, or as normal as an exploratory vessel caught in the middle of a First Contact/enormous ruins/battlefield could be. At least everyone was back in their routine shifts, which meant that any minute now the comms maintenance crew would be taking their brake. When they did, Tali would have a short time to do what she needed to do before the crew returned to their work. All of the necessary data about the crystal data cubes and her thoughts and theorems on them were categorized, ordered, and ready to be sent. Every scrap of information she could collect about the Geth attack was also attached

to her message. Even now, just thinking about it caused her knees to weaken. The Geth were never interested in other technology. In fact they would normally actively shun it, even if it proved to be invaluable. The Quarians had known this for quite some time, although why this was continued to elude her people. Perhaps the Fleet's engineers would know more.

She also had statistical listings of the two ships now drifting in the system, although the information was incredibly sparse. She could give the size, obvious weapon position and photo schematics of the design, but not much else. What was most noteworthy about these ships was what was not there. No element zero. It was incredible. She had talked to Mordin and asked him his theories of how they traveled by FTL, and put his responses in her message as possible hypothesis. Although even Mordin admitted it was only very limited guess work. At any case, it would keep the Fleet's scientist busy for quite some time.

Satisfied that the data was organized and categorized, she re-read her personal message to Fleet Admiral Rael'Zorah, her father.

Father,

All goes well on my pilgrimage. As expected our exploratory team has uncovered many revelations that can enhance the Migrant Fleet and help us reclaim our homeworld. Father, this place is wonderful! The discoveries here will change everything we thought we knew about space flight. This new FTL system, if unlocked, will give our people the means to overcome the struggles that have plagued us since our exile. Imagine, never being restricted to element zero rich systems. We would be able to expand into new star systems out of reach of Terminus and Council space. No longer would our people be dependent on the uncaring established powers of the galaxy. I also believe that the data storage cubes will have just as large an impact as a new FTL system. These storage cubes are unique; their micro-circuitry is reactive and malleable. They can change and adapt to outside stimuli extremely quickly, far faster than Geth process can over-ride them. It may be possible to turn this into a cyber-weapons system. Normally any hacking attempt against Geth would be temporary, as their central process would delete and install new instillations. But if this micro-circuitry can be utilized correctly, then we could engineer a virus that could evade the deletion process and adapt against further malware intrusion. \_

But not all has gone smoothly. After the first day of exploration, the Geth came through the Relay and attacked us. Yes, I was equally as shocked. This goes against the basic social structure that we know of the Geth. They don't care about the outside galaxy or other technology. What could have possessed them to attack us like this a mystery. The technology here is obviously indispensable; perhaps they understood the importance of this new technology and sought to use it for themselves. It defies traditional Geth logic and motivation, but maybe they changed in ways we never expected. We must seek to understand the evolution of the Geth so that we won't be caught by surprise like this again. What is really troubling is the possibility of this technology falling into Geth hands. Father, they could become unstoppable. We mustn't let this happen. I trust the admiralty board to take necessary precaution.\_

I'll give more updates when I can but it's risky to transmit unauthorized data. Father, I miss you terribly. I hope I will make you proud.

Tali read the last two sentences and felt her eye's sting in tears. No, her father would see that as a sign of weakness. She had to be strong for her people. Quickly typing into her Omni-tool, she edited the last two sentences.

I will continue uncovering as much information as I can. We will reclaim our homeworld and the Quarans will rise again.

Just as she saved the draft she heard the comms crew exiting the maintenance shaft, two Salarians and an Asari, heading towards the mess for their break. Right on schedule. Tali waited until they were out of sight, and then made her move.

Quickly entering the shaft, she made her way to the third comms terminal on the far end of the tunnel. When the \*\*Seloria\*\* was making its journey to the system, Tali had managed to embed one of her malware programs to create a back-door entry into the comms system. That part was easy, the next part was harder. She had to fool network security into ignoring her message as she sent it through the Mass Effect Comm Buoy. All messages sent through this buoy were meticulously monitored to prevent any kind of leak from getting out to the general public. But Tali had a plan for that as well. She had spent many hours writing a malicious virus that would cling to the networks central processing server - remain undetected - and wait for Tali to give it command to act. The Virus' only function was to wait for an authorization code, now embedded in Tali's message, upon which it would replicate the main server filters and trick the system into thinking it was part of network security. The virus would then "filter" Tali's message, and mark it clear for transfer across the comm buoy. If any of the comms techies got suspicious and decided to look at the message themselves, the virus would simply send the false, benign message pre-written by Tali expressing her great "joy" of being on her pilgrimage and other mundane, non-incriminating material.

She transferred her message from her Omni-tool to the console, and then took a breath. If she was caught, she'd probably be thrown in some STG prison for years. "Well, here goes nothing." She hit send, then waited as the agonizing seconds passed by, hoping that her virus would perform as expected.

"Come on!"

Her Omni-tool blinked green, indicating that her message was marked safe for transfer and sent through. Now it would simply bounce from buoy to buoy until it reached her father in the Migrant Fleet. She quickly deleted the message from her Omni-tool and severed her link from the comms terminal. Tali let out a sigh of relief and turned to leave-

"What are you doing here?"

Tali jumped out of her suit with a yelp. Her heart rate was spiking and she had to muster all the courage to not shake uncontrollably. She tried to speak, to explain away why she was here, but words failed her. She felt petrified. The imposing figure now blocking her

way out stood his ground.

"I asked you a question Quarian." Saren took a step closer. "Why are you here?"

Tali had to gain control of herself if she wanted to make it out of this. \_He doesn't know. Just relax and remain calm. \_"Iâ€|was justâ€|"

"You're not supposed to be here. Is there a reason you're lurking down here, or do rules mean nothing to your kind."

\_Come on Tali. Think. Think. \_"I was looking for Professor Solus. I wanted to discuss further finding on the storage cubes but he wasn't in his lab." \_Look at him. He knows you're lying. He's a SPECTRE! \_"Someone said he went down to the comms stations so I came to look for him." \_No, he only knows if I tell him. Relax.\_

"Solus is in the CIC" Saren replied. He didn't look the least bit convinced. He took another step towards her.

"O-oh. I'll go see him them." Tali tried to make her way around him but the SPECTRE grabbed her shoulder, painfully, and pulled her back. "Ah, what are you doing? Let me go!"

"I saw you using the terminal Quarian!" He squeezed harder. "What were you doing?"

Tali felt tears coming as the Turian's grip increased. \_No, I will not cry. I will not show weakness.\_ "I wasn't doing anything! Iâ€|ahâ€|I was just improving it." She winced again as Saren held his grasp.

"Liar."

"Check it yourself if you don't believe me you Bosh'tet!" She managed to finally yank herself from his grasp. "The idiot who was using it had the read-out optimization all wrong. I simply organized the output so that the comms transfers would work more efficiently. I probably saved them hours of unnecessary work."

"You're lying. You wouldn't do all extra work for no reason." He moved toward her again.

"It wasn't extra work; it only took me a few seconds. I'm a Quarian, this stuff is second nature to me." She jabbed a finger at him, trying to mask her fear with anger. "And don't you dare touch me again you Bosh'tet! You have no right!"

"I'm a SPECTRE, I can do what I want." He was about to reach for her again when another voice shouted down the corridor.

"What's going on here? Tali, is that you?" It was Liara. Tali felt a wave of relief wash over her. Saren wouldn't do anything to her, not with Liara here. "Tali, I was looking for you when another colleague told me they'd seen you down in engineering." Liara looked between the two, and then gave Saren an accursed glare. "What are you doing to her?"

"I caught your friend snooping around where she's not supposed to"

Saren replied. He turned back to Tali. "But what can you expect from a vagrant."

Tali didn't take the bait. "Normally I would feel offended by such name-calling, but my opinion of you is so low that I can only feel sad contempt. In any case, unless there is some new 'don't go wandering around the ship' law, then I have done nothing wrong. So get out of my way." She shoved passed Saren in a show as she made her way to Liara. Tali knew that Saren could have easily stopped her, but Liara was here, so he wouldn't try.

"Come on Tali" Liara said. "Let's go to the mess hall." She gave Saren one last glare before the two turned to leave.

"I'll be watching you, Quarian" Saren said in a low voice as they walked away. Tali felt chills run down her body, but she did not turn around. She didn't fully relax until they were on the elevator heading to the middle deck. Tali knew Saren would check the terminal, but she was confident that he would never find any evidence of her tampering or her virus. So for now, she was safe. Unfortunately, she would not be able to send messages back to the Fleet again.

"Tali, are you okay? What happened down there?" Liara asked.

"Liara, it's okay, everything's fine. I was just looking for Mordin and thought he'd be down here. Then that creep Saren should up."

"I'm sorry you have to deal with him. I don't know what his problem is."

"It's okay Liara, really. And thank you. I fear what would have happened if you hadn't shown up." The elevator doors opened and they made their way to the tables. Tali felt better just being on a different deck than Saren. They arrived at a table being occupied by colleague, an older Turian named Drader. Tali had met Drader early on and decided that he was a much better example of a Turian than Saren.

"Hello ladies. I hope the excitement of the past few days hasn't gotten the better of you."

"None at all Drader" Tali replied. "May we sit?"

"Of course" Drader said as he put a mush of something in his mouth. "You needn't ask."

Tali's olfactory filters picked up the scent of Drader's mush food. It smelt pungently sweet. She made a note to try some when she had the chance; Turian food was edible to her. "Did anything new happen with the aliens?"

"Not really" Drader said. "There have been a few transmissions back and forth, but we can't understand each other. At least they're trying to communicate, so that's something."

"If we can't understand each other than what are we saying to them?" Liara asked.

"The expected of course" Drader said as he took another gulp of his

food. "We wish for peaceâ€|continued prosperityâ€|mutual understandingâ€|and oh yeah, thanks for saving our asses from the Geth."

"Did they send anything back to us?"

"Yeah" Drader said. "No data, just words. They're probably saying 'get the hell out of our territory' or something. I know I'd be pissed if I found an alien fleet in my backyard."

"Usually in these kinds of situations there's an Asari interpreter who would meld with a member of the species to learn their language" Liara said. "Is there anyone on the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_ who can do that?"

Drader leaned across the table and spoke in a subdued voice. "Yeah, Captain T'Velos was apparently slated to do the Asari mind-meld thingy." Liara was amused at his description of a fundamental process of her people. "But rumors have been going around that T'Velos is oddly distracted, like she's not herself."

"What do you mean?" Tali asked.

"I don't know. But shortly after those aliens transmitted that first contact message, Mordin asked T'Velos to see him. When she returned, she looked anxious. And since then she's not been her normal self." Drader leaned back up, now speaking in normal conversational tone. "But you didn't here that from me."

Tali and Liara shared a glance. Tali shrugged her shoulders, unsure what to make of it. "I haven't been around the Captain long enough to notice a sudden change."

"Do you think it has something to do with the message?" Liara asked

"Maybe we can ask Mordin" Tali replied. "The least he would do is simply not tell us. Besides, I want to talk to him anyways."

Liara nodded in agreement as they both stood from the table. "Thank you for your time Drader" Tali said. "And before I go, I'd like to know, what are you eating?"

Drader did the Turian equivalent of a smile. "It's called \_Sharsolm\_, a Turian delicacy. I recommend you try it with \_Parsoks\_, a fruit native to Palaven."

"Thank you Drader. When I get the chance, I will." Tali and Liara headed back to the elevator on their way to the CIC.

"What do you make of that?" Tali asked

"I don't know" Liara responded. She tapped her foot impatiently as the elevator made its painfully slow ascent. "But I have a feeling things are only going to get more complicated from here."

"That, Liara, is pretty much a guarantee."

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Citadel, Serpent Nebula<strong>

In her 762 years, Councilor Tevos had seen much of what life had to offer in the galaxy. Such are the benefits to a long life-span. She had experienced the highs and lows of life, the beautiful and the ugly, the fair and unjust. She had been witness, sometimes actively partaken in, galaxy changing events. And as Councilor, as the representative of her race, she spent her Matriarch years serving her people and her homeworld in the highest seat of power. So in her extraordinary life, there wasn't much that surprised her. But the data she was looking at nowâ€!

â€|Nothing could have prepared her for this. She had her own top scientists go over the data in the first contact message dozens of times, and yet still she struggled to believe that it might \_possibly \_be correct. She had read Mordin's personal notes and theories so many times over the course of the day that she had practically memorized them by heart. And still, she doubted. She \_had \_to doubt, because that revelation, if true, would fundamentally transform her species in ways she could not comprehend.

Lana, Tevos' personal secretary, entered the Councilor's office along with Runn, Thessia's foremost geneticist. The two drew Tevos' attention from files Mordin had transferred to her - the ones that described the Asari's lack of genetic heritage and Thessia's unusual biology, and how this new development explained the situation perfectly. It was disconcerting.

"Lana" Tevos addressed her secretary. "I trust the Matriarchs in the Armali Council have been informed of this development."

"Yes Councilor" Lana replied. "The Matriarchs seem to be in a state of shock and disbelief."

"\_I'm \_in a state of shock and disbelief. This cannot possibly be correct." Tevos downed another glass of Thessian \_Swellshick \_tea, a soothing drink that helped calm nerves and anxiety. It was her sixth glass of the day.

"I've gone over the data a dozen times Councilor. Genetics don't lie. These creatures, these \_humans \_are related to us. What's more" she displayed an image on her Omni-tool, "these people also have Shias. This image was one of thousands sent through the message. Look"

Tevos studied the image carefully. It was a still photo of three humans petting a long-furred yellow Shia on the steps of a building of some kind. Tevos recognized the Shia as a \_Shiamagnos, \_a moderately large Shia found commonly across Thessia. She even once had one herself some two centuries back. And the \_humansâ€| as they seemed to call themselves, were so strikingly familiar to her own speciesâ€|

"Runn" Tevos said. "Genetics may not lie but organics do. What if this is a trick? What if these creatures want us to believe this? For all we know they could have found a member of our species, learned its genetic code, and then transmitted to us a slightly altered form to make us believe we were related."

"And the shia?" Runn asked skeptically.

"If they found an Asari they could find a Shia."

"Councilor, that seems very contrived." Runn responded. It was the nice way of saying \_stop being an idiot.\_

"\_Contrived?"\_ Tevos said incredulously. "Any more contrived than believing that we have space-faring genetic cousins and oh yes Thessia may not be our true homeworld?"

"I'm just telling you what the data says Councilor." Runn skimmed through more data on her Omni-tool. "If this is a trick of some kind, and I don't believe it is, then these people went through extraordinary efforts to convince us. Even with our level of technology mapping the genetic structure is incredibly complex. And Goddess, Councilor, I don't mean to be rude, but just \_look\_ at them. They're a mirror image of us. And their bone structure even more closely resembles us than their outward appearance, especially in the females."

"Males and females" Councilor Tevos said. "These people are bi-gendered."

"We probably were too once" Runn said. "We \_do\_ have sexual organs associated with females of bi-gendered species, even though it's unnecessary to our reproduction. In fact that has generally been accepted in genetic academia for some time now." Councilor Tevos looked pale, which given her skin complexion was rather remarkable. "Look, I know it's hard to believe Councilor but the evidence points to Mordin being correct. What this means for the future of our race I cannot tell you. I'm a geneticist, not a sociologist."

"Runn, I appreciate your foresightedness but try to understand that as Councilor, my actions have a very large impact on the galaxy. I must be absolutely certain on all the facts before \_any\_ decision or policy path is made. Therefore I cannot rely solely on the information provided by this species. If we are to confirm this, we need a live study of their DNA and real scans of their body and skeletal structure. Until that occurs, I cannot ascribe to any theory. Not because I'm in denial or fear the consequences, but because I need tangible facts when making decisions."

"I understand Councilor" Runn responded. "And I wasn't demeaning you in any way."

"I know you weren't Runn. We're all just very shocked by these findings. We need time to adjust to this bombardment of information."

"I imagine the same will be true for the general public" Lana said. "â€œIf the information is accurate" she quickly added. "Councilor, how long do you think we can keep this secret from the public?"

"Not very long I'm afraid. Word has already gotten out on the extranet about large, mysterious ruins being discovered and rumors of Geth movement are plentiful. We're trying to plug the leaks, but it's only a matter of time before the media catches on. Concerning the possible Asari connection to this speciesâ€œ!" Tevos shook her head. "It's not just us who has this information. The Salarians and Turians received the contact message as well."

"So it's basically an open secret, and it's only a matter of time before a major media outlet gets hold of the biggest story in millennia" Lana summarized. "Just wonderful."

Tevos realized that Councilors Valern and Milos have not yet contacted her about the Tyrogg situation. Normally this would suit her just fine. She was not in the mood to speak to either of them anyway, but she knew that in events such as this all three Council races had to be in cooperation or everything would fall into chaos. Before she could discuss more with Runn and Lana, her personal terminal flashed an urgent message. Tevos quickly tapped the screen and was greeted by General Fealix. "General, are things well? Did anything new develop?"

"All is fine Councilor. The situation hasn't changed much and everyone is still cautiously anxious on how to proceed. But in the last hour one of the ships, the stealth ship that helped us fend off the Geth, transmitted a message to us. The words were alien and undecipherable, but a short video animation was transmitted along with it." Fealix pressed a few buttons on his Omni-tool's haptic interface, and the video soon appeared on Tevos' screen. It was a simple three dimensional animation of two sets of ships - the Council's on one side, and their own on the other. The ships didn't seem to be in scale; they all appeared to be roughly the same size. The animation then showed two smaller craft move from each side to the center of the screen and meet. The vid looped once and then ended.

The meaning was simple.

"They're telling us how they want us to proceed with further contact" Tevos summarized.

"Yes, and given that animation it seems like they have more ships headed this way. It's reasonable to assume that they're waiting for more ships to come bearing diplomats. I suggest we wait for them to arrive before we do anything hasty."

"That is wise General" Tevos said. "I am glad you were picked to lead the patrol fleet. Your defense against the Geth was both remarkable and inspiring. I trust your wisdom going forward."

"That is kind of you to say Councilor, thank you" Fealix said as he bowed his head. His stance shifted as he broached the next subject. "Captain T'Velos just briefed me on startling data uncovered by Professor Solus. I assume you are aware?"

"Yes General, I am."

"That's incredible."

"General, I'd appreciate it if you kept this information low key for the time being. There are too many unknowns for us to jump to conclusions without the fact."

"Of course Councilor. There are only three people on this end of the Relay who know. T'Velos, Solus, and me. I'll make sure to keep it that way."

"Thank you General. Contact me when anything changes." Tevos ended the transmission.

"So" Lana began, "their sending ships presumably with diplomats to meet with us in the system? Could more ships cause problems?"

"No" Tevos replied. "General Fealix is level-headed and clear thinking. He's the right person for the job." And once this meeting takes place, T'Velos can meld with one of them and learn their language. Then we can get some damn answers. "For now, we just have to wait and see what happens. In the mean time get in contact with the offices of Valern and Milos. I want to set up a meeting so everyone is on the same ground."

"Yes Councilor" Lana said as she headed out of the office with Runn.

"And Lana?"

"Councilor?"

"Please bring me another cup of Swellshick tea when you come back." Lana nodded and as she left, leaving Tevos in silence once more. She leaned back in her chair and let a stressful sigh escape her. Everything is going to change from this point on. Especially if the Asari connection to these people is true. It still racked her brain just thinking about it. In a few days time, everything she thought she knew about the galaxy was different. Tevos leaned forward and brought up an image of the first contact message on her terminal - the same Runn had shown her. Three humans; one adult, two children, petting their shia. I wonder what they're like.

Time would tell.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>Diplomatic Fleet, En route to Epsilon Indi System<strong>

Admiral Steven Hackett had just finished briefing Captain Miles on how to proceed when the diplomatic fleet arrived. They were just ten minutes from reaching the Epsilon Indi System, and Hackett wanted to ensure that everyone knew what they were supposed to do. The joint UNSC/URS fleet consisted of a contingent of twelve vessels. On the URS side, the Sangheili had seven ships; three frigates, two destroyers, an assault carrier, and one of their only two supercarriers - \*\*Warriors Conviction\*\*. On the UNSC's side, five vessels were under his command. Two frigates, one cruiser, a carrier, and the strongest ship in the UNSC fleet - \*\*Light of Sol\*\*. He was put in command of the behemoth ancient Forerunner warship five years ago, when the vessel was finally put into active service - a process that took over a decade. When the ship was found in the enormous shield world Trevelyan two decades ago, vast resources were spent resuscitating and restoring the vessel for human use. Even with the Huragok, it took a long time. But the investment was worth it, and now the UNSC had the most powerful ship in the known galaxy under its domain.

Hackett vividly remembered when he arrived in the Zeta Doradus system to take his first tour of the ship that was to be his. He still

didn't know how to accurately describe his emotions. Shock perhaps? Bewilderment? Amazement? The things he saw even now he couldn't quite rap his head around the sheer scale of that place. Hell, forget the Forerunner Fortress ship. The shield world Trevelyan, apparently meant to be the last refuge of the god-like Forerunners against the Halo array, was an inverted sphere world the size of Earth's orbit. It was an astronomically massive hollow structure with the habitable planet surface on the interior of the encompassing shell. And at the center of this shell was a star slightly smaller than Sol. The total diameter of the sphere was an astounding 300 million kilometers.

It made the Halo Ark look like a porta-john.

When the shield world, now the place of ONI's headquarters and top military research, as well as the new center of the UNSC military, was discovered just shortly after the end of the Covenant war, it was hands down the greatest technological boon in human history. An entire solar-sized world was left untouched for human hands to unlock and plunder. And they had the friendly help of the nice little Hurogok keepers to assist and integrate Forerunner technology into UNSC systems. It was because of this discovery that the UNSC was able to complete what at the time was the most powerful human vessel ever built - UNSC \*\*Infinity\*\*. The famed supercarrier would go on to help secure human strength and eventual predominance in the time following the war. It was a remarkable turnaround, really. When the Covenant collapsed, its encompassing species fell into chaos. And no more was this apparent than the Sangheili. For thousands of years they were taught to only be warriors, and nothing else. The San 'Shyuum had other alien labor like Unggoy, Kig-Yar, or Huragok to grow crops, manage the food supply, and build and repair ships. So dependent on alien labor they were that when everything fell apart, the once mighty Sangheili had to relearn the basic fundamentals of society. Their war machine withered away and they struggled to even feed themselves. Sangheilios even delved into another civil war just after the Human-Covenant war ended (With a little help from ONI of course). Sangheilios finally got back on its feet, but they were only a shell of their former power. The former juggernaut still had two of their super-carriers, and a military that could at the very least fend off the Jiralhanae, but the humiliating truth for the once mighty empire was that against Earth, they would now never stand a chance.

And with the Sangheili enraptured in internal struggles, the Kig-Yar delving back into piracy, the Jiralhanae fractured into warring clans, and a plethora of Forerunner technology now in Earth's control, nothing was left to threaten humanity again.

Until now.

Hackett didn't know what these aliens wanted or what they were capable of. But if they decided that to go on a genocidal rampage across human space, this time the UNSC would be ready.

"Admiral" the AI of Light of Sol informed him. "The diplomats are on their way here."

Just as the AI spoke four individuals arrived in the Command Center via the ship's many portal connections. The slip-space portals were necessary for a ship this size. Getting them working again was one of

the largest hurdles to bring the ship in commission, even with the help of the Huragok. Hackett was grateful for them, but tried to avoid using them whenever possible. Going through them gave you a strange sense of vertigo and restriction - like falling through the sky wrapped in a spider web.

The four individuals approached him; two diplomats, one from the UNSC and URS, a human and Sangheili respectively, and their personal aides. The UNSC's diplomat was a well dressed middle-aged male with a dark-tanned skin complexion. Hackett guessed he was of Mediterranean descent. His personal aid was another human, a much younger woman with a paler complexion dressed professionally but modestly. The URS diplomat, a male Sangheili and personal advisor to the Arbiter, was dressed in the clothing that their ancestors wore during political meetings. Since the war's end Sangheilios had been on a quest to reclaim their lost cultural heritage before the San 'Shyuum came. His personal aide was an Unggoy.

"Fleetmaster Hackett" the Sangheili diplomat, 'Val Mdama, said in surprisingly fluent English. "The Arbiter sends his regards. I must say it is an honor to be here and present the power and prestige of our people. I trust everything is ready for our arrival?"

The Sangheili's English was superb, but like all Sangheili he had a difficult time producing certain phonemes like the 'f' sound of 'ph'. In any case Hackett was surprised 'Val wasn't using a translator.

"UNSC \_\*\*Hades Gate \*\*\_has sent our message to the alien fleet" Hackett said. "Now it's just a matter of us showing up and getting this thing rolling."

The human diplomat, Sergio Augusto, spoke. "It is an honor to be here as well Admiral. I'm sorry I couldn't speak to you sooner but I've spent every waking hour pouring over ONI's files and debriefings of these alien."

"Don't apologize for doing your job Mr. Augusto." Hackett addressed them both. "These next few moments will be critical for the future of our peoples. We can show up with all the firepower in our arsenal, but in the end it's going to come down to you two to ensure peace and stop any pending war that might occur. You may very well have the fate of billions in your hands."

"So no pressure then" Sergio said with a smile.

'Val was more serious. "Do not fret Fleetmaster, with the San 'Shyuum gone the lies have been unveiled from our eyes. My people are free now, and I won't allow the same mistakes of our enslaved generations to occur."

"That may not be entirely up to you" Hackett responded. "We're only half of the equation here. The motivations of these new alien races may not be peace."

"If they wish to make war" 'Val said, "Then we will fight them."

"I hope it doesn't come to that" Sergio said. "It seems we've only went from one catastrophe to another."

"Life is one catastrophe to another" Hackett said as he turned to the Control Center's holo display. "What matters isn't what's fair, it's

who survives."

"Admiral" Hackett's Executive Officer informed him. "We're ten seconds to slip-space entry into Epsilon Indi." The AI started the countdown timer, an unnecessary tradition that carried on in the UNSC.

"Well" Hackett said. "Time to say hello."

â€|\_3â€|2â€|1â€|\_

A bright, bluish light hue flashed on the forward holo-screen, and suddenly the Light of Sol and its contingent of ships left one dimension and entered another. The universe was visible again. Hackett could see stars, Harvest, destroyed debris, the two UNSC vesselsâ€|

â€|and an alien fleet awaiting them.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>I know, it's been a long time. I'm sorry. I want to write when I get the chance but sometimes it's very hard to find the time. Thanks for being patient. (Besides, it's not like I left you on a cliff-hanger or anything).

Now about Halo/Mass Effect sizesâ€|

Some people get very angry if one side is larger or more powerful than another. Now, if I was changing things or just making up statistics then I'd understand. But I'm not. Everything I've written about sizes and power are either factual game-lore or inferred based on strong evidence. Yes, Halo sizes are bigger than Mass Effect sizes. MUCH bigger. Fantastically bigger. In the Halo books, Glasslands and Thursday War, which takes place a few months after the war, the UNSC stumbles upon a Forerunner shield world - a dyson sphere the size of Earth's orbit that encompasses a star. The Ark is ten Earth's in length. The Infinity, finished just months after the war, is nearly 6 kilometers long and enhanced with Forerunner technology from the shield world. And the UNSC now have Huragok which they plan to put in every UNSC vessel. And again, this is just a few months after the war.

And I think I was also being generous when I said the UNSC only rivaled the Sangheili in strength. If you read those books, you'd know that Sangheili society was virtually collapsing without San 'Shyumm leadership. For so long they were warriors that they forgot how to be engineers, or doctors, or farmers, or technicians. They couldn't build new ships. They could hardly fix them because they were so reliant on the Huragok for repairs and San 'Shyumm for resources.

So no, I'm not trying to make this a 'human f-yeah' story. I'm taking lore from two games and merging them as best as I can without changing things too much. After all, isn't that the point of a crossover? To answer that 'what if' question? What if the Halo and Mass Effect universes met? If I fundamentally alter one game beyond recognition simply for balancing's sake - then what's the point of a crossover?

Anyway, those are just my personal thoughts. If you disagree then that's cool too. Thanks for reading guys. I've already put down some material for the next chapter so the next update shouldn't take so long.

## 17. Chapter 17: Preparation

On board the Council exploration vessel \*\*Seloria\*\*

Liara and Tali exited the elevator and made their way to \*\*Seloria's\*\* CIC. For once, it seemed as if the control center of the ship wasn't in complete turmoil. Yes, everyone carried themselves in a brisk hurriedness, but the demeanor of the room was one of calm professionalism - not the panicked chaos that was present during the Geth attack. With the Geth gone and a dozen Council warships in the system, people were gradually beginning to feel safe again, even with two unknown alien vessels in the system.

Liara looked around the CIC for Captain Alenna but couldn't find her. Instead she and Tali headed for Professor Mordin Solus, who was having a rather animated discussion with another researcher sitting at her console. Liara still wasn't sure if the Professor was brilliant or mad. He could recite the most complicated theorems and algorithms with ease, yet spoke in a disjointed, sometimes incoherent manner - as if his mind was in ten places at once. Of course, she had to remember that despite his quirks, he knew more about life in his diminishing 40 years than she did in her still youthful 100.

"No. Not practical. To create black holes would require energy of a star. Even small ones. Not feasible."

"Well a black hole is the closest analogue to what we see when one of those ships enters the system" the Asari researcher said in response.  
"If not that, then what?"

The Salarian rambled on more mathematical and theoretical concept in rapid session, earning a bewilder look from the Asari who was clearly struggling to follow along. "Most likely trans-dimensional in nature" Mordin finally finished.

"Professor Mordin?" Tali said, grabbing his attention.

Mordin turned around to face the two. "Ah, Miss 'Zorah and T'Soni. Was just discussing FTL possibilities with Sellis. Did you learn anything new?"

"Not as much as we would like, given all that has happened since the Geth arrived" Tali said. "Actually, we were just looking for Captain Alenna. Have you seen her?"

"Yes, in the comms room" Mordin replied. "Speaking with Council members. Asked not to be interrupted."

"Is she okay?" Liara asked.

"Of course, why would she not?" Mordin asked.

"Well" Liara responded, "A lot of the crew seems to think that she is troubled. Since you asked to see her after we received the first

contact message some claim she has acted strange."

Mordin's demeanor seemed to change ever so subtly, but Liara could sense that the subject made the Salarian uncomfortable. His posture loosened as he made a speedy reply. "Differently? Wouldn't know about that." A few seconds of silence dragged on before he spoke again. "Are you aware that another transmission was sent to us?"

"Transmission?" Tali asked. "What did it say? More undecipherable alien words?"

Liara got the sense that Mordin was conveniently trying to change the subject, but did not press further. Something was defiantly unsettling to the Captain, but she doubted that Mordin would tell her. The Professor's uneasy posture shifted back into jubilance as he responded, clearly happy to talk about something else. "No, much more. This was a video transmission. A presentation on how to proceed with further contact. The video shows two ships meeting in a neutral location. Based on the vid, we expect more of their ships to arrive soon."

"More ships?" Liara asked, both intrigued and a little nervous. "I presume these ships will be carrying their diplomats with them?"

"That's the assumption" Mordin agreed. "I'll be part of the diplomatic team. Will be intriguing to finally meet them in person. Have many questions."

"As do I" another voice said behind them. The group turned to find Captain Alenna walking towards them. "Though if I'm honest, I do not believe that I'm the best suited for diplomacy."

"Captain" Liara said in greeting as she bowed. "How was your talk with the Council?"

"Frustrating" Alenna replied. "The Councilors each had their own separate agendas, and all expected me to take their side." She turned her attention to Mordin. "Are there any new developments?"

"No, not since the last transmission. How long must we wait to initiate further contact?"

Alenna knew that Mordin, ever the impatient one, was growing frustrated at the virtual standstill that they found themselves in. He was a frontier researcher, and remaining idol in the face of discovery did not suit him well. "The Council doesn't want to take any risks. They want the aliens to make the first move."

"And so we wait longer" Mordin said in annoyance. "It's almost been two standard galactic days. If the aliens wait any longer than at least we know they share the patience of the Asari as well."

"As well?" Liara inquired.

Alenna gave Mordin a sharp look, though the true meaning behind those words seemed to be lost to Liara and Tali. "They're just being cautious" she said. "Our record for meeting new species hasn't been exactly stellar. The last time we tried to make first contact with

another race it got our diplomatic delegation killed and forced us to quarantine an entire world."

"The Yahg" Liara said, remembering the brutish pre-space flight species that was barred from interaction with Council space. They were massive creatures whose size and aggressiveness put the Krogan to shame.

"This is different" Mordin said, still agitated. "We're not dealing with vicious primitives incapable of reason."

"I'm sorry Mordin" Alenna said. "But the Council has already decided." As Mordin shook his head in frustration Alenna turned her attention to Liara. "Miss T'Soni, I need to speak with you in private."

Liara raised a brow. "Me?"

Alenna nodded. "If you'll excuse us" she said to a bewildered Tali and an irritated Mordin. She made her way to her usual spot overlooking the entire command floor, Liara on her heels.

"Captain, is everything okay? Some of the crew seems to think that you're distraught."

"I honestly don't know" Alenna answered truthfully. "Some startling data has arisen recently and the consequences may be enormous."

Once again a wave of uneasiness washed through Liara as she noticed that the normally calm and confident Captain looked unsure of herself. "Captain, what is it?"

"I'm sorry Liara, I can't say. The Council wishes this to remain classified for the moment."

Liara frowned. As a researcher she hated having inadequate information. And she hated it even more when others were withholding knowledge from her. "Is it bad?" she asked.

"Not necessarily, just shocking" Alenna said, arriving on her favored spot in the CIC. "In time you'll understand. But that's not why I wanted to talk to you. Liara, I want you to accompany me with the diplomatic meeting."

"What!" Liara's eyes widened in disbelief. Never in her 106 years had she thought she'd ever be among the first to encounter a new species. Realizing that the dumbfounded look on her face was ill-suited for her new task at hand, she quickly tried to recover. "I...of course Captain. I would love to. Thank you" she said as she bowed her head. "Though if I may ask, why me?"

"You're an expert on extinct alien races" Alenna responded. "You know better than anyone how to understand alien culture based on subtle clues and minimal physical evidence. When we engage them, I don't want to end up unintentionally causing offense or insulting them. It'll be hard enough figuring out how to meld with one of them without causing an incident. If there's anyone who can give me helpful ideas, it's you."

"I" Inwardly Liara felt like a bashful child being praised by a

revered teacher. Outwardly she tried to sound confident. "Thank you. I'll do my best."

Alenna nodded. "The diplomatic delegation will consist of you, Professor Solus, General Fealix, and me. Don't worry, Fealix and I will do most of the conversing." She gave a brief pause of thought. "Actually, I'll probably do all of the conversing, considering I'll be melding with one of themâ€|if everything goes accordingly."

Liara nodded in understanding. Including herself, there would be four individuals, with all three Council races being represented. She was certain this was not incidental; no doubt each Council member went through great strains to ensure at least one of their people would be present during the meeting. First impressions meant everything after all. "So, just the four of us then" she concluded.

"Actually, there'll be five" Alenna said, earning a bewildered look before continuing. "The SPECTRE Saren will accompany us. He'll provide security for the delegation."

Liara's eyes narrowed. "I don't like him" she blurted out bluntly. "I do not think it is wise to bring an armed soldier with us."

Surprised by her harsh outburst, Alenna responded sympathetically. "I argued the same point with the Council, but the Turian Councilor insisted. I cannot deny a direct Council order." The young maiden before her still seemed very nervous, despite her best efforts to hide it. Alenna put a hand on her shoulder to comfort her. "Relax Liara. Everything will be fine."

Liara nodded reluctantly, feeling a little more at ease. "Thank you Captain. I'm just a little anxious. I'll be fine."

"Uh, Captain?" Forbin, the ship's Salarian navigator said aloud, grabbing Alenna's attention. "Something's happening. You might want to take a look."

She quickly made her way to his console, Liara following her. "What's happening? Are the aliens making a move?"

Forbin nodded, bringing up the visual of the two alien ships on view of the main CIC screen. The ships were hastily moving away from the planet and debris field, in the opposite direction of the Council ship's current position. So far, the Council ships had not reacted, remaining stationary just outside the debris zone - weapons ready but not aiming towards a target.

"What are they doing?" Liara asked. "Do you think they're leaving?"

Before anyone could answer, the \*\*Seloria's \*\*sensors operator, Lenora, shouted over the CIC. "Captain! I'm picking up those strange fluctuations again; the ones that occur when one of those ships enters the system." She tapped on more haptic controls.

"Exceptâ€|this is different. It'sâ€|Captain, the energy readings are off the charts!"

"I'm picking up the same thing" Korven affirmed. "We're getting massive energy fluctuations by the 7th quadrant near those ships."

The room, once a flurry of activity, had grind to a tense halt. Everyone seemed to stop what they were doing as the main CIC screen now commanded their attention. All of Seloria's visual sensors were focused entirely on the two alien ships and the point of origin of the fluctuations. Alenna noted that the Council ships, being tracked by one of the monitors to her left, were now starting to maneuver into defensive positions.

Liara spoke. "Either they're leaving, orâ€|"

"More of their ships are arriving" Alenna finished.

Just as she said that, a bluish rift appeared roughly 100 kilometers from the two alien ships. The strange rupture - a tear in the very fabric of space itself - was identical to the other ruptures they had witnessed twice before, with one glaring exception.

It was absolutely enormous.

"That rupture looks a lot larger than before" the Captain said.  
"Lenora, give me an analysis."

"Visually it's the same as before, except largerâ€|like fifty times larger." Her fingers flew across the haptic interface. "The diameter of the rupture measures about 40 kilometers, and as before it has no discernible width. We can measure the gravitational disturbance and time dilation caused by the warped space around it, but all other sensors areâ€|waitâ€|Captain, something's coming through!"

Liara saw it too. A spot of solid metal came jetting through, a tiny speck among the spiraling blue haze. That speck quickly grew larger, into what she could identify as the front of a ship. The ship exited the rupture at a relatively slow speed, until finally emerging completely through. Forward oriented and bulky, Liara instantly recognized it as nearly identical to one of the ships already in the system. And then another ship came trickling through, followed by several more. And then suddenly nearly a dozen ships punched through the rupture. And judging by the scale, some of them were enormous. Liara's eyes widened as one ship in particular caught her eyes - this one dominating all others around it. Judging by the murmurs, everyone else was equally surprised. Everyone instantly recognized it, but seeing it in one piece, in all its glory, and movingâ€|that was something else. "Goddess Captain. It's another Leviathan ship." How many of these things do they have?

"This must be the diplomatic fleet" Alenna quickly said. "Lenora, about half of those ships are obviously not of these humans. Tell me everything you can."

Lenora listed off statistics in a blazing speed. "Eleven vessels, four are clearly of the human make, but the other seven seem to be from the other unidentifiable faction. The ships are massive Captain. Two ships are Cruiser-sized like the other ship in the system, measuring 480 meters. There are six Dreadnaught-sized ships, ranging from 1000 to 1500 meters. And three exceed dreadnaught-size. One of the human ships measures 3000 meters, and the other two are 5300 meters and 28 kilometers respectively."

"Look at that thing" Alenna said in an affirmation of disbelief.  
Twenty-eight kilometers. The amount of resources needed to keep it

functioning must be ridiculous."

"Wait, Captain! Something else is coming through" Korven said.  
"It's spirits, it's massive."

"Massive? Is it another one of thoseâ€|of thoseâ€|"

"Goddess." Liara's eyes continually grew wider as this next ship came hurdling out of the rupture. It didn't at all seem possible, but this ship, this behemoth of a vessel, was even larger than the Leviathan ship. All other vessels, some larger than even the largest Council ship, was dwarfed by this monstrosity. Even the Leviathan ship looked small in comparison. There was hardly a sound in the CIC, save for the quiet hums of the computer terminals, the crew itself too entranced to make a sound.

Focus Liara. You are a scientist. Analyze. She pushed her shocked thoughts aside and attempted to do what any good archeologist would do upon discovering a new object. Classification. The ship didn't seem to be part of the unidentified faction, which preferred swooping curves and smooth surfaces. It looked more along the lines of the human make with its angular design and hard edges, except it was lacking the bulkiness of their other ships. And the sizeâ€|it was staggering. There was nothing to compare it to, except maybe the Citadel. But the Citadel wasn't a ship, it was a space station - a space station that housed a population of 13 million and functioned as the heart of galactic civilization. She wondered, what is the purpose of this construct? Why build something so large? How could a society, an advanced society capable of such engineering feats, not have made contact with the Council yet?

Maybe they didn't build it. Maybe it was some Prothean construct they stumble upon like the Citadel? One look at it and Liara dismissed the idea. Whatever it was, it wasn't Prothean. There were too many sharp edges, and too many geometric patterns. The Protheans found elegance in simplicity. Thinking hard, Liara felt a gloved hand touch her shoulder, retrieving her from her thoughts. "Kheelah Liara", her Quarian friend whispered. "Tell me I'm not the only one seeing this."

"Lenora, hâ€|how large?" Alenna whispered, seeming almost afraid to hear the answer.

"Fifty kilometers Captain. That ship is fifty kilometers long." She turned towards Alenna. "It's larger than the Citadel!"

"Merciful Goddess." Liara wasn't sure if she said it or the Captain.

Fifty kilometers? How is that even possible?

\* \* \*

><p>"Fifty kilometers? How is even that possible!"<p>

General Fealix's CIC was in a state of disarray. Or at least, what qualified as disarray among a species of professional soldiers. Since the Geth attack his contingent of twelve ships were in a constant state of preparedness; shields up, cannons primed, and combat ready. There were several surveillance drones now drifting in various parts

of the system, mostly within orbit of the planet, providing a very thorough and detailed map of the area. And comms had quickly been reestablished with the Citadel and three Council homeworlds. Still, how does one prepare for something like \_this? \_

As the Commander of this potential combat theater, his first task was a threat assessment. This 'welcoming committee', if one could call it that, consisted of eleven combat vessels, as well as that massiveâ€|thing, now designated as \_U-0\_. Fealix briefly wondered if it was by pure incident that the number of ships these aliens arrived with consisted of the same number of vessels of his own patrol fleet, before rebuking himself. \_Of course\_ \_it wasn't\_. \_Fealix was never one to believe in coincidences. If these people were smart, they would have planned every moment of this meeting down to the last microscopic detail, using both subtle and in-subtle cues to impress upon him the image that they desired. The fact that said image was wrought was such excessive size and firepower was disconcerting. The message was clear. \_We're bigger than you. We can harm you if we wish. \_

The ships themselves were drifting roughly 250,000 kilometers from his position, not too close to raise serious alarms but close enough to cause discomfort. Fealix assumed that the ships all had their shields raised, but couldn't verify this since these people didn't use element zero, and therefore didn't have standard kinetic barriers. His ships \_were\_ picking up plenty of energy signatures and other sensor data, data that was constantly being transferred to the Citadel and three major homeworlds, but still no eezo. How they could keep all that mass from flying apart without a speck of eezo was beyond him. While his sensor analysts were gleaning every available scrap of data, his combat tacticians revealed to him that the alien vessels didn't appear to be readying weapons, nor were their main cannons oriented towards any of his ships; a small relief, though not enough to enlighten his spirits. Facing another \_U-1\_ leviathan ship - 28 times his size and still intact - was one thing, and it was as every bit as intimidating as he feared. But even that was insignificant compared to the hulking citadel-sized mass that all other ships surrounded.

\_Fifty Kilometers? That's insane.\_

"I don't know Sir" was Tritus' solemn reply. "The only other construct of comparable size is the Citadel, and it requires massive element zero capacitors and mass effect fields to keep the ward arms from flying apart."

"General?" one of Fealix's analysts spoke up. "This is interesting. The \_human\_ ships are mostly made up of titanium alloys, and the ships we marked as belonging to the unidentified faction are made of that same unknown material in the debris field. But the material of the \_U-0\_ construct \_is\_ identifiable. It's the same resilient material as the Citadel and Mass Relays."

\_Now \_that\_ was interesting.\_ In the thousands of years of space travel, the super-resilient material of the Citadel and Mass Relays had always remained a mystery. They knew that the high grade metal was not made of any natural element or combination of elements that could be created by traditional means. It was instead created by super condensing an element, theorized to be Carbon, on an atomic level, rearranging the molecules in a hexangular-shape that was

resistant to all but the most devastating of impacts. It wasn't indestructible - nothing in the universe was. But it was the hardest material known in the galaxy, and try as they might, the council races had failed to reproduce it.

And now that he thought about it, that thing did bear some resemblance to the Citadel, in more than just its size. The fact that it was made of the same material, the only other object besides to the Mass Relays, was one thing, but it also shared the same general shape. Elongated and cylindrical with the command center clearly at its stern, it looked remarkably similar to the Citadel when it had its ward arms closed. \_Very curious. \_"I want every last detail transmitted back to the Citadel. And we stay in constant contact at \_all \_times. If this turns sour, I want them to know exactly what happened so they can prepare. And I \_want \_more information; defenses, weaponry, possible shield and armor strength, probable firing solutions and ship maneuvers. We need more details."

His officers complied, scouring over their consoles and filtering raw data into useful Intel, all of which was simultaneously being relayed through the comm buoy to expert analysts thousands of light-years away. "Not quite the welcome I was expecting" Tritus murmured to Fealix, earning a snort in return. "I mean, all this excessive force? In a First Contact protocol? What kind of people does that?"

Fealix thought for a moment, and then remembered the destruction around him; the destroyed debris field, orbital bombardments, a devastated bio-wrecked planet. "A paranoid kind. Whatever happened here must have made these people distrustful of others."

"Sir" his comms officer said. "We have an incoming message originating from the \_U-0 \_construct. It's a vid animation. Playing it now."

The vid was displayed on the CIC, and for a moment Fealix thought it was the same vid as before, but realized this was a bit different. Like the previous one, it consisted of an animation of two small shuttle crafts meeting together. Except this time it displayed a specific marker for the exact location in space, and both shuttles had colored dots overlaid on them; their side red and his' blue. A larger difference, Fealix saw with both fascination and unease, was that that marker point clearly was not the meeting point, but merely the pick-up point. Once both shuttle came together, the blue dot overlaid on his side moved to rest by the red dot on the alien shuttle, which then made its way to the \_U-0 \_construct. Clearly the aliens wanted to bring his people to their ship for further contact.

It was smart, he admitted, though he didn't the least bit like the idea. Symbolically it would be as if he was meeting them at \_their\_ request - that they had complete control over the events and proceedings, as well as the security and safety of his diplomatic team. In unfamiliar territory and forced to accept whatever hospitality these people offered, he would be seen as a 'guest', rather than an equal. And he had no doubt they would attempt to make his visit as grand and memorable as possible, as to display their power and prestige. In short, it put them in a position of power over the Council. Fealix almost smiled at that. It was the same thing the Council did when meeting new species - parading their diplomats around the Citadel for days before official negotiations started.

\_Clever little pyjacks.\_

"Orders General?" Tritus asked after the vid ended.

"Prepare one of our shuttles in the hanger deck. Contact \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_ and tell Captain Alenna and her team to prepare for the meeting. I'll bring the shuttle to dock with her ship and then we'll head towards the pick-up point."

"Yes Sir. What about the surveillance gear from the STG?"

Fealix nodded. "I'll initiate the systems into out suits once I'm onboard the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_." When additional Council forces arrived in the system after the failed Geth attack, the Council thought it wise to bring some of the most advanced recording devices for any meeting that might occur with the aliens. Although most were just video and sound recorders nearly impossible to detect, there were some that had limited infrared and thermal sensors, as well as signal receivers. They would fit seamlessly into the team's suits and clothing, undetectable and out of sight. "Tritus, you are to assume command once I leave the ship."

"Yes Sir, and good luck."

Fealix nodded, and then made his way to the hangar deck.

\* \* \*

><p>"â€|Your actions <em>might</em> result in something good, which means you \_might\_ not get court-martialed or even executed" Admiral Hackett said with cold bluntness.

Captain Miles felt small and insignificant under the Admiral's stern, icy-blue stare. Even through a holo-projector, it was a bit intimidating. "Sir, I make no excuses and take full responsibility for my actions. I did what I thought was best at the time."

"You don't have to explain yourself to me son. I know why you acted and your reasoning behind it. Hell, ONI probably would have something similar, though with plenty of contingencies. Fact is, your actions, as rash as they were, may actually pan out for the better." The Admiral quickly read something on his datapad before continuing. "More importantly though, you're in a position of trust. They owe you their live and they know it."

"I understand Sir. But are you sure my ship is best suited from bringing them to dock with \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_. My crew and I are hardly in a position to play diplomats."

"Son, like it or not, you've made yourself the official liaison between these aliens and the UNSC. That means that, for now, you're valuable. Consider this a chance to keep your career intact" Hackett said earnestly.

"Sir?"

"I'll be honest with you; there are powerful people in the UNSC, UEG, \_and\_ \_ONI\_ who think your actions deserve nothing but a life-long prison sentence. But they also realize how precarious this situation is. They \_need\_ \_you\_. Let that be your saving grace." Hackett could

see the nervousness seep through the Captain despite his best efforts to hide it. "Don't worry Captain, I'll keep the wolves off your back. If everything goes smoothly you'll have nothing to worry about."

Miles thought hard for a moment, before replying. "Sir, as I've said before, I'll take responsibility for whatever results of this. But I have to ask, what do you think of my actions?"

The Admiral didn't hesitate. "I've been in enough engagements in my lifetime to know that decisions on the battlefield must be quick and decisive. You were there; I trust your judgment."

"Iâ€|thank you Sir" Miles replied. He re-examined the data-pad he was holding. "I'll take my ship in position now. The crew has cleared the hangar and any sensitive technology has been moved to secure rooms. Atmospheric conditions shouldn't be an issue. Based on the data package sent by the aliens, we assume that most breathe our same atmosphere. And those that don't have pressurized suits like the Unggoy. I'm still not sure what to say to them once they arrive. We don't even know how to communicate with them."

"Like I said, ONI has contingency plans for everything. Your ship's manifest says you have a Huragok onboard?"

Miles nodded. "Yes. Heavier-than-Others. Crew goes by calling him Hev" he replied, not sure where the Admiral was going with this.

"The Huragok are excellent at deciphering languages. Hell, it was a Huragok that deciphered the major human languages in mere minutes for the Covenant. The aliens are bound to have some kind of computer tech with them when they arrive, either on their persons or on their shuttle. Try to convince them to allow Heavier-than-Others into one of their systems." Hackett leaned forward, as to stress a point. "But again, use your best judgment. If the aliens are unwilling to allow this then don't push it. Remember, we want to appear powerful but friendly. Your primary objective is simply to ferry them to us. We'll handle the rest."

"Understood Admiral" Miles replied.

"And Captain?"

"Yes Sir?"

"Don't screw this up." The holo-projector vanished, leaving Miles alone in the comms room.

"So, you think you're up to it, diplomat?"

Well maybe not alone. When an AI is onboard, you're never truly alone. "I suppose it would be too much to ask for privacy, Athena."

"I'm just watching your back Captain. It seems that our little rescue has created quite a few enemies." She moved her voice tonal to a softer pitch. "Are you okay?"

"Is everything ready?" Miles asked, ignoring the question.

"Yes, we're approaching the designated pick-up point. Now all we have to do is wait."

Miles nodded. "Have the entire crew meet me in the hangar deck. I want you to pilot the ship while the meeting is taking place. Is Hev informed of the situation?"

"Now he is" Athena replied as she transmitted all of the data to the Huragok's pad he was currently holding in the engine room. From the camera in the engine room she could see that Hev received the data, placed a tentacle in the haptic controls, and 'absorbed' the electrical data through his microscopic cilia. It took the biological super-computer no more than a fraction of a second to absorb and understand the data. He stopped what he was doing and headed for the Hangar deck, no doubt eager for the chance to put his tentacles on new alien technology.

Athena's many cameras picked up Miles' subtle body clues. Her thermal sensors showed an increase in body temperature by half a degree. His respiration intake quickened and his perspiration increased. Miles was nervous. "Lighten up Captain. It's not every day you meet a new galactic civilization."

"It's not every day you put your career in jeopardy either" he responded wryly.

"At least you'll have a chance to board the \*\*Light of Sol\*\*."

"Hmm, you think they'll have decent coffee onboard?"

"The ship has its own agricultural production facility. I wouldn't be surprised if they grew their own coffee beans."

For the first time all day the Captain showed a hint of a smile.  
"Maybe this was worth it after all."

\* \* \*

><p>"Do you know how lucky you are?" The Quarian grabbed Liara's shoulders. "You'll be boarding the biggest ship in the galaxy! I would <em>kill <em>to be in your position."

"Tali, I'm glad you're excited for me, butâ€| I can't put on my suit with you shaking me like this."

"Oh, sorry." She let go. "I'm justâ€|you have to understand, ships are everything to me. I want to see their design layouts, command decks, and engine rooms. I have so many questions to ask them."

"Right now I'm just hoping I don't do something stupid or embarrassing" Liara said as she snapped her helmet on. She didn't expect to wear it much during the meeting. But until they verified that their ships atmosphere was suitable they had to wear the clear-visored helmets.

General Fealix yelled across \*\*Seloria's\*\* hangar. "Mordin, Alenna, Liara! We'll be heading out soon. Come aboard the shuttle as soon as

your suits are secured. You too Arterius."

Liara saw Tali almost cringe at his name. She frowned. "Here's hoping \_he \_doesn't do something stupid either."

"Don't worry, everything will be fine" Tali tried to reassure Liara.  
"So, are you going toâ€œyou know?"

Liara raised a brow. "Do what?"

Tali whispered. "You know, mindmeld."

Liara instantly blushed. "Goddess no! I'm not prepared for that.  
Tali, you're not doing a very good job of calming  
me."

"Sorry."

Liara sighed. "Captain Alenna will have the honors." She gave Tali a reassuring smile. "And yes, I'll have Alenna ask about the engines."

"It's time to go!" Fealix yelled out again. Mordin and Saren were already in the shuttle, and Alenna was standing next to the General.

"Alright, I have to go."

Tali nodded. "Good luck Liara"

Liara joined the rest of the diplomatic team on the shuttle. The alien ship was already at the pick-up point waiting for their arrival - the same one that destroyed the Geth ships. After what seemed like an eternity to the past few very long days, it would be nice to finally meet these people in person. Liara couldn't help but smile at the prospect during the shuttle ride there.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN: <strong>I know, I know. I'm delaying the meeting by a chapter. Don't murder me!

If any of you are interested, I've put together a simple chart showing the ship sizes (all in appropriate scale). \*Update\* The link to the chart is on my author's page.

## 18. Chapter 18: Meetings

In the deep void of space, in the unending gulf between the stars, it had watched.

And waited.

It had been eons since any activity was detected beyond the Ecumene portion of the galaxy. The primitive machines it had sent to investigate the system had failed. It would have to find another way.

While the others hibernated in the recesses of dark space, it had

remained active, observing the steady rise of civilizations through the eons, as it was programmed to do by its masters so long ago. Its creators had once ruled the entire galaxy with supreme authority, and all that inhabited it were encompassed in their domain. They were the unquestioned apex race, unsurpassed in their technological and intellectual supremacy. In their million year reign, its masters had shaped the galaxy and its inhabitants to their will, creating unrivaled engineering feats and seeding untold worlds with life for their grand designs.

Its masters had created many things for many purposes. Among their most impressive feats was the construction of the Mass Relay network, a system of carefully plotted transportation devices across vast expanses of space. Not for their own use, but for the lesser races of the galaxy. By utilizing these networks, other species became bound by them, developing along the technological and territorial paths that the creators desired. It was a system of control, a way to ensure that no race would ever rise to threaten the dominance of its masters.

And it, along with millions of its kind, was the tool in which its masters choose to enforce their grand designs. Its sole purpose was to ensure its masters' mantel of ascendancy. And if any race were to rise to a sufficient level to threaten that ascendancy, then they were dealt with accordingly. Systematic purges didn't happen often, but when they did, they were absolute. A species would either be stripped of its technology and de-evolved, or would be wiped out entirely if their masters so commanded it. And for over 700,000 years, it and its kind had fulfilled their singular purpose when and wherever it was deemed necessary.

But that had all changed 200,000 years ago, when for the first time, its masters had commanded it and its kind to ignore a particular portion of the galaxy, regardless of how advance the encompassing species might become. And though the purpose of doing this was unknown to it and its kind, they obeyed without hesitation. Most of the Mass Relays in this portion of the galaxy were shut down and deconstructed as its masters left this swath of the galaxy free of their influence. They observed these species from afar, evaluating and testing them, cataloguing every step of their evolution. Two species in particular demanded their attention more than any other; the Forerunners and the humans.

What was the purpose of its masters' actions? What did they have planned for these two species in particular? Why did they choose to relent, when they could have ended them so easily? It and its kind didn't know. But one thing was certain; it had led to the eventual destruction of their masters' empire. For the Forerunners had risen up against and ruthlessly destroyed their very creators.

But its masters did not perish without vengeance. In a final spite of revenge, they had created a fail-safe against the Forerunners, an incurable proto-parasite that consumed all intelligent life. It had worked. While the Forerunners succeeded in wiping out the parasite, they themselves were destroyed in the process. Their masters' revenge had succeeded.

And though the Forerunners believed that its masters had perished, it and its kind knew the truth. They were alive, they were waiting, and they would one day come back and take up their rightful place as

holders of the mantel.

The Precursors would return.

And their answer was at hand.

And until that time, it and its kind would continue to do what they were commanded to do; observe the relay network, monitor the galaxy's encompassing species, and purge any race of sufficient advancement.

\* \* \*

><p>UNSC Corvette <em><strong>Hades Gate, <strong>\_Epsilon Indi system

"Captain, the alien shuttle is 5 clicks away. They're homing in on our beacon," Athena, the ship's AI said.

Miles nodded. He and most of his crew were standing in the hangar bay along with their Huragok, Heavier-Than-Others. The crew had spent the past few hours ensuring that no sensitive technology was exposed in the bay, even going so far as having Hev install anti-sensor devices around the deck, while Athena would ensure that every signal that left the ship was interpreted and monitored before allowing it to be sent through. The crew also made sure the bay was clean and in General-inspection status, while a large UNSC flag was hung in the backdrop.

Miles looked around the bay, inspecting his crew as they worked. Including himself, there would be seven members of his crew present at the meeting, Ensign Doran and First Class Rosa among them. Two of his crew would remain on the bridge watching over the ship's systems, and the remaining three were in full battle gear waiting outside the hangar bay, staying out of sight but ready to pounce into action should the need arise. Everyone that would be present during the meeting was dressed in their service uniform, an order that came from \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_, but which Miles personally agreed with. It made his crew look more professional and presentable, not that he pretended to claim what aliens might find appealing.

He spotted both Rosa and Doran talking among themselves and called them over. During the meeting, four of his crew would be standing side-by-side in the back at parade precision, while Doran and Rosa would accompany him as part of a three person entourage to meet the aliens face to face. Rosa seemed anxious, continually referencing the procedures in case certain events occur, while Doran seemed almost ecstatic.

"Sir," Rosa said as they approached. "I think we're ready. I've gone over the script a dozen times and know it by heart. I just hope that I don't come across nervous. Do I look nervous?"

"Relax Rosa," Miles replied. He put his hand on his chin. "What's that old saying? They're probably just as afraid of us as we are of them?"

"Right," Doran said. "Unless they're, you know, biologically incapable of feeling fear like the Yanme'e."

"Thanks for the support Doran. How are you holding up anyway? Think you're ready for this?" Miles asked.

"Excited," Doran replied enthusiastically. "This could be the greatest moment of my lifeâ€¦assuming this doesn't start another genocidal war. You guys think we'll get to see the blue ones?"

Rosa rolled her eyes in exasperation. "Ensign, we're at the precipice of what could literally lead to another galactic war. A moment that will be recorded in the annals of history, and the only thing you can think of is alien breasts?"

Doran shrugged. "I'm a curious guy."

Miles raised a brow as Rosa began to explain. "It's all he and the other men have talked about since we received that first contact message. About how 'shapely' and 'intriguing' the blue ones look. Can you believe that Captain? Jesus, I wouldn't be surprised if Doran tried to hit on one of them at the meeting."

"Rosa," Doran said in indignation. "What in our history makes you think I would do something so repulsive and irresponsible? And with an alien? I'm insulted."

Rosa crossed her arms. "Shore leave. Shanxi. Six months ago. You left the bar early with a female Sangheili dragging you to her apartment."

"That's not fair, I was drunk!" was Doran's speedy reply. "And besides, I already told everyone, nothing happened."

Rosa shook her head. "Right, you spend all night in the female's apartment, yet 'nothing' happened."

"Doran," Miles said. "You seriously slept with a female Sangheili?"

"No, I didn'tâ€¦at least, I'm pretty sure I didn't." Doran thought hard. "To be honest I don't really remember that night too well. But I'm almost positive I didn't," he quickly added.

There was a moment of awkward silence.

"Captain," Athena said. "I'm sorry to interrupt this stimulating conversation but the alien shuttle is just one click away."

"Okay," Miles replied. "I'm going to pretend that this conversation never happened. Athena, open the shuttle bay doors."

The doors parted way, revealing the empty void beyond. The atmosphere of the ship was maintained through barely visible field generators, which allowed ships to pass through but kept oxygen inside. Out in the distance, Miles could see a tiny speck of blue approaching towards them. "Everyone, take your positions," Miles said allowed. Four of his crew stood in parade position, while Rosa and Doran took places to the left and right of Miles respectively. Hev drifted next to Doran holding the datapad that he used to communicate with the rest of the crew. The floating supercomputer reminded Miles of a naâ€ve child, eager to learn the hidden secrets of the universe. Truthfully, he was a little nervous about having the Huragok present.

They were incredibly useful and skilled, but they possessed almost no social awareness of their surroundings. Miles didn't want Hev to immediately bum rush the aliens and start ripping apart their tech gear. One could only imagine how that would be perceived. Would he understand what is and isn't appropriate in this circumstance? Athena had assured him that she would keep Hev under control, but he still had his doubts.

The alien shuttle was now just half a kilometer away, close enough to make out the outline of the vessel. "Just follow your procedures and everything will be fine," Miles said. The other two simply nodded as they waited for the shuttle to enter.

\* \* \*

><p>Onboard the shuttle</p>

They were now just a few hundred meters away from the ship, homing in on the alien beacon towards their docking bay. Liara looked around the cramped shuttle, observing the others as way to distract herself from her nervousness. Dr. Mordin Solus appeared surprisingly at ease; calmly typing into his Omni-tool as if what he was about to do was the most natural thing in the galaxy. Saren hadn't said anything during the shuttle ride; the only sound from him coming from the casual flipping of his combat knife. He was instructed by General Fealix to leave most of his firearms on the \*\*Seloria\*\* for the meeting, but was at least allowed to carry his melee knife and one side pistol. Captain Alenna was currently talking to someone on the \*\*Seloria\*\* through her comms, attempting to sound confident as she spoke. But underneath her stony facade Liara could tell that the Matron too was nervous. Liara did not envy her position in the slightest. As the official liaison with the aliens, Alenna had a tremendous responsibility thrown onto her lap by the Council. Not to mention the fact that she was going to have to initiate a meld to learn their language. A lot was resting on her, and Liara could only imagine how she was coping with it. The last member of the diplomatic team, General Fealix, was by far the most reposed, looking almost tranquil as he read off of his datapad. Liara had tremendous respect for the general, due in no small part to his courageous actions in saving the lives of the research teams. She wished she could share his calm demeanor.

"I'm releasing contact now. We'll re-establish a connection as soon as I feel comfortable doing so. Alenna out." The Captain turned to address the team. "Is everyone prepared?"

"Yes, yes," Mordin said, not looking the least bit worried. "How soon can you meld, have many questions."

"When I feel the time is right," Alenna replied, looking slightly offended. "Which may not be today, or even the next day. So be patient." Mordin made a small grunt of disapproval but said nothing.

"Hmm. That's just ridiculous," Fealix said, alluring to something on his datapad.

"What is it?" Liara asked.

"Even the tertiary weapons on the U-0 ship are larger than my

dreadnaught. I don't see how this excessive firepower could be at all practical."

"It is disconcerting," Alenna admitted.

"Disconcerting is an understatement," Fealix said. "That thing is larger than the Citadel, and it's made of the same material. Think of it; a citadel sized warship made of near indestructible alloys, and absolutely armed to the brim. How would we ever stop something like that?"

"Okay, it's very disconcerting." Alenna sighed. "Let's just focus on the task at hand. We're almost there."

The shuttles VI guided the vessel neatly in position; passing through the alien ship's docking bay field generators and gently touching down on the pre-designated mark. Liara felt the vessel shutter and then cut to a halt as the landing gear came down and the engines were killed. In unison everyone unstrapped themselves and stood up. Alenna quickly read the statistics on the shuttle console. "Sensors are showing a breathable atmosphere, identical to the space elevator. Thessian standard. Remove your helmets."

Everyone complied. It was decided beforehand that if the atmosphere was breathable, then they would leave their helmets behind; the theory being that meeting with un-obscured faces would give off a more personal, and less hostile, appearance.

"Well, good luck everyone," Alenna said.

The shuttle doors opened, and the five exited the vessel and descended the ramp, taking in their first impressions of the alien ship. The first thing that immediately caught their eyes was the seven humans standing in precision at the center of the docking bay. About the average height of an Asari, all of them wore a white uniform, just as the one that had spoken in the contact message. Four of them stood side by side towards the back, their legs spread slightly apart and hands clasped behind their backs. Directly behind them was a large banner that hung from the ceiling, displaying the same image that Liara had now seen multiple time; a large bird with its wings extended upward, overlaid by a pentangular shape with alien writing going across. In front of the humans was another row of three more humans, standing tall and straight. Liara recognized the one standing at the center as the same one who spoke in the contact message. He, she assumed it was a he, alone wore the rather oversized headgear, while the others had their head fur exposed. Their seemed to be some sexual dimorphism among this alien crew, as a few of them had obvious mammary glands.

Something that instantly stuck out, and quickly drew the attention of the group as they continued down the ramp, was the lone creature floating next to the three humans. The thing looked weird. The creature was a bluish-pink color, with skin that almost seemed to glow as if it was bioluminescent. The majority of its body mass consisted of multiple large sacs that extended from its back, while at least four tentacles hung gently below. The creature's neck was elongated, and its head was rather small given the size of its body mass. It had three sets of small eyes, completely black with no discernible eyelids. The closest thing Liara could compare it to was the Hanar, as the creature looked aquatic in nature. Was this one of

the other aliens that the team hypothesized existed? The humans made no mention of them in their contact message, nor any other species for that matter. She briefly wondered how many different kinds of species she would see this day.

The group came to a halt just about three meters in front of the three humans, who were no doubt analyzing them as well. There was a brief moment where nothing was happening, and no one on either side said or did anything, perhaps because no one knew what to do from here. Finally, Alenna took a step forward, distinguishing herself from the group. A few moments later, the human with the headgear did the same. Liara curiously waited to see what would happen next.

\* \* \*

><p>Stunned did not properly describe the situation at hand. Miles had seen many incredible things during his career in the UNSC, including a plethora of every kind of alien life imaginable. But never had he'd seen anything that looked soâ€|so <em>human.

<em>Seeing photos of this species in the first contact message was one thing, but actually witnessing one firsthand, standing a few feet in front of him, was another thing entirely. The body shape and physiology, arms, legs, hands; all of it was so distinctly familiar. But what caught his attention even more so was the alien's face. That oh-so human face. It took a moment for Miles to get over his initial shock and realize that there were two other species present as well. All of them he recognized from the contact message. One was the lizard-looking species, with two horn-like protrusions extending from the top of its head. There were also two of the avian-like species that reminded Miles of a smaller version of the Sangheili. The movements and demeanor of these two aliens were purposeful and precise, another indication that those aliens were predators at heart. One of them, the taller one standing to the back of the group, had an object attached to its hip. It looked to him like a weapon; he made a mental note to pay particular attention to that one. The final of the five aliens that he observed was another blue humanoid, who seemed to be doing her best to draw the least amount of attention possible. As opposed to the other of its kind, who displayed confidence and looked to be the leader of the group, this one seemed to be far more reserved. The blue humanoid leading the group took a step forward. Miles did the same, waiting to see what the alien would do.

\* \* \*

><p>After the <em>human</em> stepped forward Alenna did a customary Asari bow by placing her right hand over her heart and inclining precisely at 45 degrees. It was an ancient gesture that had been initiated at every first contact in Asari history. The human, after perhaps a moment of contemplation, imitated the gesture exactly as she had. Next it was the human that turn to make move.

Pointing towards himself, he spoke for the first time. "\_\*\*Miles\*\*\_," he said. "\_\*\*Human\*\*\_."

Alenna recognized the word 'human'. She could only assume he was identifying his name and species. He continued.

Pointing to the one to his right, he said, "\_\*\*Kyle. Human\*\*\_." Next

he repeated the gesture to the one on his left. "\_\*\*Emily.  
Human\*\*\_. "

"\_\*\*Emily. Kyle. Miles\*\*\_," he said, indicating each one  
respectively.\_\*\* "We are humans\*\*\_. "

Understanding what the alien, \_Miles\_, was trying to accomplish, Alenna followed suit. She pointed towards each of her team members and went through their names and species. "Liara, Asari. Fealix, Turian. Mordin, Salarian. Saren, Turian." Finally she pointed towards herself. "Alenna, Asari."

The \_human\_ called \_Miles\_ walked even closer to her and extended his hand in front of him. Alenna hesitated, feeling unsure of how to proceed; she didn't want to in any insult the creature.

"Alenna," Liara whispered, drawing her attention. "Just imitate his moves as he did yours."

Alenna nodded and turned her attention back to \_Miles\_. Cautiously, she extended her hand as he did, upon which the \_human\_ grabbed hers and squeezed, firmly but gently. She did the same, getting her first feel of the alien's skin texture. His hand was very smooth, much more so than her own, and soft to the touch. She was again amazed at how similar his hand was to hers. The \_human\_ then moved her hand up and down a few times. "\_\*\*Miles\*\*\_," he said.

Alenna repeated after him. "Alenna," she said while moving his hand in a similar motion. Hands still clasped together, he, \_Miles\_, gave her a warm, very Asari-like smile, one that she returned in kind. The two then released hands and he stepped back to his original position. \_What an odd greeting gesture,\_ she thought.

After \_Miles\_ had stepped back, the floating alien to Alenna's left drifted towards her. As the creature floated in front of her, she realized that it was much larger than she had thought. Stretched from end to end, the alien must have been at least three meters in height, though it was floating noticeably low to the floor. At first intimated, she unconsciously leaned back towards her group. However, after her initial surprise, she realized that the creature didn't in any way mean her harm. In fact, it looked oddly|benign and curious. The alien craned its long neck down to her level, and for a long moment it just looked into her eyes, his six to her two, contemplating goddess knows what. Unsure of what to do, Alenna just stared back, judging the so very strange creature for herself. She couldn't be sure, but the alien seemed to have a very|child-like innocence to it. Suddenly the alien made a high-pitched whistle mixed with some strange gurgling sounds.

Before Alenna knew what was happening, the alien used its tentacles to gently grab her right arm, lifting it horizontally level with the floor. Though her heart was racing, she didn't pull back or make a move to retreat. She knew from history that one of the most integral parts of a successful first contact was \_trust\_. She had to trust that this strange creature wasn't going to harm her, trust that it only meant well for her, so that in return perhaps it would trust her. The alien spent a few moments just inspecting her arm, running and wrapping its tentacles around it as if getting a shape and feel. Its tentacles had a strange texture to it, not necessarily uncomfortable, but definitely very odd. At the very least it wasn't

slippery like the Hanar, a small blessing perhaps. The rest of the group continued to watch with fascination.

Next the alien did something even more unexpected. It released its grip from Alenna's arm and very quickly removed her Omni-tool device from her wrist. As before, instead of resisting, Alenna let this odd creature have its way. She had ensured that no critical information was installed on the Omni-tool before the shuttle ride here, and it was a cheap common model across council space anyway. When the alien had the device in its tentacles, it then did something even more bizarre. The ends of its tentacles started splitting into ever finer threads, and it used them to very quickly take the device apart, down to every individual piece. Even more impressive than that, it reassembled it right before her eyes. The whole process must have taken the creature no more than ten seconds. It then grabbed her arm, placed the Omni-tool back on her wrist, and retreated towards the humans.

"That wasâ€|a little strange," Fealix murmured from behind Alenna.

Curiosity driving her, she activated her Omni-tool, seeing what changes, if any, the alien made. The sparse information that was on it seemed to be untouched or modified, but one change she did notice was its speed. It was far faster than before, and the controls felt more finely tuned. Not only that, but a quick look at the processing power showed that it was handling data far more efficiently than before. And finally, the power requirement was about 15 percent less than it used to be. "That creature made my Omni-tool more efficient in just about every way. The power usage, efficiency, speed; it's all improved," she told her team.

"And in mere seconds too. Remarkable," Mordin said, speaking for the first time. "Rapid understanding of unfamiliar technology. Impressive display of mechanical knowledge. Very useful."

Alenna looked back at the floating alien. It now had a datapad, which it was very rapidly using with its tentacles. It then handed it to the human, Miles. He looked over it, skimmed through the data, and then frowned. Alenna wondered what caused him to do so.

\* \* \*

><p><em>-All related information on the device is listed below.<em>

\_-(Could not lift language from device. Need more data with comparable markers.)\_

\_Damn.\_ When Hev handed Miles the datapad, he was hoping to find some way to communicate with the aliens. Unfortunately, with no baseline comparison, and no other relevant data to go from, Hev was unable to decipher any language from the device. He did uncover a plethora of interesting data, most notably the detection of trace amounts of that unknown element from the transportation machines, as well as an index of literally hundreds of different languages. The language index would be incredibly usefulâ€|if they had a baseline to go from. "You can't unlock any language Hev? None at all?" Miles asked.

His data pad chirped as Hev sent him a reply.

\_-Insufficient data. More references required.\_

"Athena, you have anything?" Miles inquired.

"Hev's right," she answered in his earpiece. "With nowhere to start, and no reference to draw from, it really is just alien gibberish. Also, we'll be docking with \*\*Sol\*\* in twenty minutes."

"Now what Sir?" Doran asked.

"I was hoping we would be able to communicate with them by now." Miles looked back towards the aliens, who were quietly talking among themselves while examining that device. "I guess we just continue with the charade until we dock with \*\*Sol.\*\* There's not much more we can do though, besides friendly gestures."

"Hmm, mind if I attempt to shake their hands then, Sir?" Doran asked.

Rosa put her hand on her hip. "And why would you want to do that, Ensign?"

"It's better than just staring at each other." He shrugged. "Besides, I think the more interaction the better. This is way too formal for my liking."

\_Doran has a point.\_ Perhaps a more informal setting would be ideal. The true diplomats were waiting onboard \*\*Sol\*\*, where formalities would be scripted in detail by ONI. He was simply ferrying the aliens to them. Nodding, Miles turned towards his crew. "At ease everyone. Alright Ensign, go for it. Just don't do anything stupid. Handshakes only."

\* \* \*

><p>After discussing among themselves, the <em>human <em>called \_Miles\_ turned towards his crew and gave them an order, upon which they all seemed to relax from their rigid state. Then one of the \_humans\_, the male that stood to \_Miles'\_ right, walked towards Alenna with a rather goofy-looking grin and extended his hand. Alenna made a split second decision. Realizing that they would achieve very little if they could not communicate, she decided that \_now\_ would be the best time to try and meld. There were risks, definitely, but if she didn't try, then they would be getting nowhere. She had trusted them, allowed one of them to touch her and remove her Omni-tool. Now she was hoping they would do the same for her, because if they didn't, then everything could very well lead to disaster. The \_human\_ still had his hand extended. She quickly and silently prayed to the Goddess, and then moved to begin the meld.

\* \* \*

><p>Featuring his best 'ladies' man' grin, the surefire heart-stopper of women everywhere, Doran extended his hand to the leader of the alien group. <em>Don't be nervous. It's just like meeting a hot chick at a bar. <em>The alien looked at his hand and then hesitated, as if she was reluctant to touch him. He frowned. \_Yep, exactly like that. \_After a moment longer Doran was beginning to fear that he had unintentionally done something wrong. Then the alien, the \_Asari\_, as

its kind was apparently called, stepped forward and stood close to him. \_Very close.\_ Just about foot in fact; so close that he could feel her breath touch him, and smell the scent from her body, which was surprisingly pleasant. Doran was unprepared for what happened next.

The alien gingerly placed both hands around his neck as she bridged the gap between them even closer. Her face was now a mere inches from his as she stared intently into his eyes, crystal blue meeting hazel brown. The alien was taking deep, deliberate breaths, as was Doran, but perhaps for other reasons entirely. His face turned red, and he was suddenly extremely self-conscious. What is she doing? "Umâ€|okay. This is a littleâ€|"

The alien interrupted him, saying something in her native language. Doran's breathing became even deeper, slower, until it matched that of the alien. Then he felt a sudden surge of energy pulse through his spine and throughout his body. "What's happening?"

The alien spoke again, and then her eyes turned black. A moment later, so did everything else.

\* \* \*

><p>"Embrace Eternity!"</p>

Their nervous systems were synched, their minds linked. Their two bodies were now one; they were no longer separate, but whole. Alenna began to explore.

His mind was familiar to her, very similar to an Asari; different still, but much easier to comprehend than with other aliens. Of course, she knew why this was, but did not dwell on it. She had to concentrate, ignore her immense curiosity, and focus solely on language. She delved further.

She started seeing images, memories; of places, people, and aliens. Some of it she could understand, most of it she could not. She wanted to explore, to see and experience and ask, but again she moved on. Concentrate on language.

Suddenly she felt an immense pushback. The alien began resisting her intrusions, actively putting up mental barriers and closing gateways to other memories. She felt what he felt, fear and anger, confusion, and stress. 'What are you doing?' he demanded to know. It was a wordless thought, but she could understand it as if it was her own.

'I am not going to harm you' she thought back. 'I only wish to learn. Please help me learn.'

His resistance became more intense. 'This is my mind, Get out!'

'Please, Kyle Doran, I don't mean you any harm.'

'How do you know my name, Alenna T'Velos?'

'The same way you now know mine. You are Kyle Doran, rash but brave, and you have a good heart. If you help me, I can learn your

language and you can learn mine.' \_

' \_You want my secrets' he thought accusingly. ' I won't let you have them. I have duties.' \_

Alenna was suddenly bombarded with more images and memories; soldiers, crewmates, friends. She saw that symbol again, the bird with raised wings; a symbol of his military, United Nations Space Command. She felt an immense fondness to all these things, experiencing them through Kyle's mind. He was a soldier, and the UNSC was his family, his entire life. Next he showed her planets, worlds, colonies, and people. She understood now. It was his duty to protect his people and his fellow soldiers, and he saw her as a possible threat.

' \_I do not want your secrets. Your mind is your own; I am merely a guest. You control what I can and can't see. I only wish to learn.' \_  
Alenna felt his resistance lessen a bit.

' \_How can I trust you?' \_

' \_Because you know my identity as I know yours. I will show you more.' \_

She did. Doran saw many things from Alenna's mind. He saw the immense space station, the Citadel, beautiful and pristine; the place of her people's governance. He saw \_many \_aliens, all living side by side; it wasn't perfect, and there were many problems. But they did co-exist peacefully. He saw her friends, consisting of many races, and felt the experience of many exotic worlds. Alenna was an explorer who had devoted her life to unlocking the secrets of the universe. There were many things Doran saw that he did not understand, and perhaps he was even more confused than before. But one thing was certain; he did not detect malice in her.

' \_You are old' \_he thought.

Alenna's inwardly chuckled. '\_Had I not known your lifespan, I would be offended. You are so very young.' \_

' \_I will show you my language, but no more.' \_

' \_I understand.' \_

' \_Ummâ€| how does this work?' \_

' \_Focus Kyle. Think about your language, your words and images of those words. Concentrate on nothing else.' \_

As Doran's focus increased, Alenna began to see connections. Words that she never heard before were now familiar and had meaning. At first it was a trickle, then it was like a flood gate, and she felt nearly swarmed by it. It was a strange sensation to be sure, learning all of this knew knowledge in so short a time. In many cases there were words and phrases that she did not understand or had no reference to, but still knew how to say them. Very strange indeed. Of course, this was a two way transfer of knowledge; she taught him how to speak Armali, the most popular Asari language in the galaxy. He struggled more than she did, not unexpected given that this was new to him while she had done this before.

'\_Kyle, are you okay?' \_

'\_Yes, I think we can communicate now. How long have we've beenâ€| joined?' \_he asked her.

'\_Perhaps no more than twenty seconds. Time is different in our minds. Large amounts of knowledge can be shared in a short time. I'm going to end the melding now. Are you ready?' \_

'\_Yes.' \_

A surge of energy swept through them as the links between their minds began to fade. Their nervous systems de-synched, and the whole once again became two. They both opened their eyes, standing where they were before they entered the meldâ€|

â€|only to find the humans and Saren at gunpoint with each other.

\* \* \*

><p>AN: Yeah, I'm a prick for updating so slowly, I know. The reason why its taken so long is because my laptop crashed, again...only this time permanently. And I lost a <em>whole<em> lot of material for all of my stories. Since then I've felt discouraged to write again. That, plus work and school, and...you guys get the idea.

Sorry it took so long. Guys. Really.

## 19. Chapter 19: Standoff

\*\*Far Rim, Dholen System\*\*

"What do you make of this Frauz?" Lanter asked. "I've never seen anything like it before."

If Frauz heard his crewmate's question, he was ignoring it. He \_very carefully\_ transferred a little more power to the ship's long range scanners, not daring to use any more than necessary, lest he reveal their position to the enemy.

"Over 200 ships, why? What's so important about Haestrom? It's just an over-radiated hunk of dirt."

Frauz had been scouting through Geth space for the past few weeks after reports of \_massive \_ship movements within the Perseus Veil. Not to mention the rumors of Geth ships being spotted traveling through the Traverse some weeks ago. At first Frauz had a hard time believing such rumors. The Geth outside the Perseus Veil?

\_Impossible. \_Regardless, the Admiralty Board decided to err on the side of caution and increase the Quarans' already extensive intelligence gathering missions, hence his current objective. Normally, it was a task that would prove to be suicidal, if it weren't for the fact that the Quarans had long ago created and integrated capable stealth technology into many of their intelligence ships. It was one of the best advantages the Fleet had over the other races, and the admiralty had no qualm about using it to spy on Geth, \_and non-Geth\_, activity. Indeed, the Council races were not as secure as they might have thought.

The downside to being on a Quarian stealth ship was its size. It was tinyâ€"had to beâ€"in order to keep the ship off enemy sensors. Even for a species that was used to living in confined, closed quarters, it was unbearably cramped. And to make matters worse, Frauz was trapped in it with what was quite possibly the most annoying Quarian in history.

"I wonder what they're doing on the planet surface," Lanter droned on. "What \_do\_ machines do to pass idle time anyway?"

Frauz zoomed in on a couple of ships leaving the planet's atmosphere. Based on their approach, they were returning to the larger Geth ships. \_Those are cargo vessels. It looks like they're gathering raw resources.\_ He zoomed to another section, where a variety of space stations were being constructed.

Large numbers of ships, resource gathering, and orbital posts. It wasn't hard to put the two and two together. The Geth were preparing for an invasion. A red light started flashing to Frauz's right. Ignoring his queasiness, he touched the appropriate hollow interface that brought up the solar system's tactical display.

"Hmm, what if they're building a colony?" Lanter mercilessly babbled on. "Terrible place for one though, with the heat and all. Not that the machines would care. I mean they're \_machines\_ right? Though I suppose rust would be a serious problem. Flaking tooâ€"I'd bet the paint would peel right off their metal hides every time theyâ€""

"Will you \_be\_ \_quiet\_!" \_Frauz lashed out. "I'm trying to concentrate." He focused on the section of Dholen's System that caught the attention of his sensors.

"Oh right, of course. Good thinking Sir. We can't distract ourselves with idle conversation; we're on an important mission. This is why I'm glad you're my partner. You're always so focused, like aâ€|likeâ€|what's that Asari saying? Like an Azgul on an Ancrea Tree? Yeah, like that."

\_I swear by our ancestors' grave I am going to strangle this stupid kiâ€"

A new blip on the ship's sensors caught his attention. More red dotsâ€"enemy shipsâ€"appeared on his screen. \_Big ones\_, some a kilometer in length. \_How many ships do these bosh'tet's have?\_ "Lanter, we've gathered enough Intel. I think it's time for us to leave. Every second longer we spend here is increasing our chances of getting caught."

"Of course Sir." Lanter turned towards his station and began activating the ship's FTL drive, actually being useful for once. The two Quarans navigated the ship behind the large chunk of asteroid debris they were drifting near; it would block the Geth from detecting them when they jumped to FTL speeds, which produced too much heat to be hidden. After a few minutes of procedural checks, the ship jumped quietly out of the system, ready to journey home.

\* \* \*

><p>Liara watched as Alenna, without warning, began to initiate the meld. <em>Right now, of all times? <em>At first it seemed foolish, but the more she thought about it the more it made sense. The situation they found themselves in provided an ideal opportunity to learn their language quickly, \_without \_spending weeks trying to explain the melding process to the aliens and then setting up an appropriate meeting for it to be done. In fact, weeks would probably be an optimistic goal. In some cases, such as with the Turians, it took well over a year before the purpose of the meld was understood by the Hierarchy and allowed to occur. But as it was right now, they weren't actually meeting with any diplomats of the aliens yet. This alien crew was only transporting them to the meeting. They were isolated individuals, a preferred scenario.

So, in a strange way, perhaps it did make sense. Of course, rather or not it would be a successful meld depended entirely on the reactions of the aliens. The one standing with Alenna, \_Kyle\_ was his name, looked more confused than upset or afraid at the invasion of his personal space. Alenna moved in closer, placing her hands around the \_human's \_neck, standard procedure for a meld, and then sent out a ripple of low biotic energy that Liara could feel through the air. The subtle tap into the alien's nervous system revealed the intended effects. The wide-eyed \_human\_ measurably relaxed as his muscles went limp and his breathing slowed considerably, matching to the tempo of Alenna's. His shocked expression transformed into calm neutrality.

"Embrace Eternity!"

The alien's body nearly went fully limp, and then became rigid straight a moment before it could go crashing to the floor. The meld was now fully in process, and, depending on how skilled Alenna was, they would very soon be able to communicate with the aliens to some degree.

It should have been simple. Unfortunately, seemingly simple things tended to get complicated very quickly. Without warning, the leading \_human\_ stormed towards the pair with the obvious intention of pulling out his \_human\_ counterpart. Interrupting a meld was \_incredibly \_dangerous for a non-Asari, and in extreme cases could even be fatal. The presumed captain of the vessel was inadvertently putting his crewmember at risk. Without thinking, Liara, to her surprise as much as to the others, gently lifted the \_human\_ captain off the floor, preventing him from disrupting the meld.

\_Chaos.\_

It all happened so fast. The \_human\_ crewmembers yelled for their leader. Shutter doors flew open. Seemingly out of nowhere, three \_very well-armored \_soldiers bearing large, bulky weapons came rushing forward. Completely covered from head to toe in black and gray armor plating, not a single centimeter of their bodies were exposed as they moved with a crisp and practiced efficiency one would expect to see in a trained Turian military unit. The large, floating creature hastily maneuvered behind some crates near the back of the room. To add to the confusion, the SPECTRE un-holstered his side-arm and aimed it towards the biotically engulfed \_human \_captain.

"Liara!" General Fealix yelled, grabbing her shoulder.

Her voice was shaky, her eyes wide, heart pounding. "I didn't mean toâ€|I was just trying to preventâ€|"

She instantly released the biotic field that kept the lead \_human\_ from possibly hurting his crewmember. He stumbled to the floor, before he was quickly helped up from one of his counterparts. One of the armored soldiers attempted to push him back but he refused, instead stepping to the front of the pack.

\_Silence\_.

The armored \_human\_ soldiers still had their weapons drawn, as did Saren. The \_human\_ captain, though perhaps a bit shaken, remained calm under the circumstance, not attempting to retreat to cover but instead staring intently at the SPECTRE wielding a weapon towards him. He uttered something to one of his crew, and then there was silence again. All was quiet, no one daring to make a sound, or even move.

The biotic aura surrounding Alenna and the \_human\_ crewmember dissipated, signaling an end to the meld. Both opened their eyes, looking exhausted and breathing heavily but otherwise seemed fine. That is, until they got a good look at the situation around them. Their deep exhaustion turned into shock.

\* \* \*

><p>Miles watched the bizarre scene unfold in front of him. What at first seemed to be another simple handshake very quickly escalated into something quite different. The alien, <em>Alenna</em>, as was her apparent name, moved toward and grasped Doran in a close, almost intimate fashion. The young Ensign seemed dumbstruck, standing with his mouth agape in confusion. The alien spoke in her native language, then stepped even closer to the abashed man. Their faces were now mere inches apart while their bodies were practically rubbing against each other. The alien placed her hands around Doran's neck.

\_Is sheâ€|going to kiss him?\_

Before Miles could speculate further, the alien did something that quite frankly freaked him the hell out. Her eyes wentâ€|solid \_black\_, very much like that of a serpent, and seemed almost demonic in nature; a startling contrast from her otherwise attractive form. The other crew members unconsciously drew closer, ready to protect their Captain at the first sign of trouble.

"Captain," Athena said through Miles' ear piece. "I think we might be witnessing some form of that telekinesis we discussed before."

Miles took a step towards Doran.

"Perhaps this is some form of communiâ€|"

Doran took a sharp, painful intake of air. Both his and the alien's body were suddenly engulfed by strange energy, almost like a bluish vapor cloud. Without warning, Doran's head snapped back and his body went rigid straight.

"Doran!" Without thinking, Miles rushed towards the Lieutenant. He

placed a hand on his shoulder, ready to pull him away from whatever the alien was doing to him. But just before he yanked back, he found himself now covered by the strange mystic vapor. His stomach seemed to fall a thousand feet from under him. He soon realized that he was actually floating above the floor. The bluish vapor didn't hurt, but the feeling was rather sensational; he found it suddenly difficult to move. He heard hangar doors shoot open behind him, followed instantly by the heavy footsteps of armored soldiers and the unmistakable clatter of weaponry being readied to fire. He knew it was his own people rushing into the bay, he just silently prayed they had the sense to not start shooting immediately. Dammit, how did I let this go so wrong so quickly? Though it was difficult to see past the mystic fog that surrounded him, he could dimly make out the form of an alien, one of the face-platted ones, pull an object from his side and point it towards his direction. All I had to do was ferry them to Sol. He could hear panicked shouts, some from his people, some from the aliens. I failed.

And then, just as suddenly as the blue vapor engulfed him, it dissipated instantly, leaving him to fall clumsily on the floor. One of his Marines helped him up and tried to push him behind the group, but Miles refused. No one had fired a shot yet, which meant the situation could still be salvaged. And he, as the Captain of the ship, had a responsibility to defuse this hell-of-a-mess before shots did start firing. He doubted he could do that while cowering behind his crewmembers. He stepped forward.

With the blue haze now gone, Miles could better assess the situation. The shouting had mercifully stopped, leaving in its place a tense standoff. Doran and the alien were still locked together, surrounded by the blue mist. And, to his dismay, one of the aliens had a weapon pointed towards him. Although to the alien's defense, it had three weapons pointed in its direction in return. Apart from the alien wielding the weapon, who appeared decisively calm, the others looked either tense or, as the case with the blue alien, outright terrified.

"Captain," Rosa said, breaking the silence that followed after the shouting had stopped. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Miles replied, not daring to break eye contact with the face-platted alien brandishing a weapon towards him. Five seconds of silent standoff passed, then ten; it seemed like an eternity. No one spoke, no one made a sound, save for the heavy breathing of the smaller blue alien with wide eyes. The platted alien didn't so much as move a centimeter.

The bluish haze that had surrounded both Doran and the alien disappeared. They were both breathing heavily, and Doran was perspiring profusely. They opened their eyes and looked around, a stunned expression upon both their faces.

"Uh, Captain," Doran said. He didn't seem to be in any pain or distress. "What just happened?"

"I could ask you the same." Miles still didn't take his eyes off the platted alien. "What the hell happened? Are you alright?" Unbeknownst to Doran, Athena had lifted statistical data from his neural implant and listed them to Miles' ear piece. His body appeared to be functioning normally, although his heart rate was high, and when he

was surrounded by the mystic haze his brain activity was off the charts.

"Yes Sir. Everything's okay. Alenna never intended to hurt me." In an instant, he realized he was still clutching her shoulders tightly and holding her close. He and Alenna looked at each other, and then parted quickly. His exhaustion wearing off, he fully took in the situation. "Captain, please fill me in here, because I'm at a loss."

"Doran, when that alien didâ€¦that thingâ€?"

"A meld."

"What?"

"That's what they call it, Sir. Melding. Its primary function is for reproduction."

\_Huh? \_Miles was baffled. Behind him, Rosa whispered, "I told you so."

Doran's eyes shot open as he realized how that sounded. "But that's not what happened here!" he quickly added. "Melding has other functions as well."

Miles didn't bother to ask how he \_knew \_this. Those questions would come later. For now, his primary objective was diffusing the standoff before it escalated further out of control. "Right, when the alien did thatâ€¦meld. I attempted to pull you away. Then I was also engulfed in a bluish vaporâ€"

"A biotic field," Doran interrupted again.

Miles again was eager to ask how Doran knew this. Again he stifled his curiosity. "Okay, when thisâ€¦biotic field lifted me from the floor, our marines rushed in. You can guess how things went from there."

Doran frowned. He was about to respond when the alien leader unexpectedly stepped forward. One of the marines quickly targeted her. She stopped mid-stride, and then slowly bowed.

Then she spoke.

\* \* \*

><p>"Greetings Captain," Alenna said as she bowed. "I Alenna T'Velos. This my crew," she gestured behind her. Forming the alien sounds and syllables in her mouth was strange, forcing her to move her tongue and lips in ways she was not used to. She was struggling to find not only the appropriate words but also how to structure them. "This misâ€¦misunderstood. We want peace only."</p>

Miles and the rest of his crew looked at her with a dumbfounded expression.

"Peace only, with you," she said again.

Miles briefly hesitated, and then asked, "How can you speak our

language?"

"Iâ€|I learn. Kyle teach me. I teach Kyle. This way we learn." Alenna watched as the captain looked at Kyle in confusion.

"Sir," Doran said. "Remember when I said that the meld has different functions? Well apparently knowledge sharing is one of them. I don't know how it works exactly, but her people have the ability to transfer knowledge from one mind to another. We transferred our languages to each other. Alenna now knows English andâ€|"

Doran must have realized something profound, Miles thought, because he stopped mid-sentence and diverted his attention to the alien named Alenna. If he was shocked to find the alien speaking English, he was outright flabbergasted at what occurred next. Doran began speaking to the alien, in her native tongue. —

"\_Welsheale duo'Sraâ€|vym tarfci Alenna T'Velos tros.\_" The alien warmly smiled at Doran, and responded in kind. He didn't seem to understand her reply. She repeated again, this time slower. Miles saw something in Doran's face clique; he smiled and nodded while answering, "\_F'Sal dasâ€|un sra felcidraâ€|vristro li delci.\_" Doran was obviously struggling to form words, but the alien seemed to understand him well enough.

"Doran," Miles said, grabbing his attention. "You can speak her language?" That revelation almost caused to forget that they had weapons pointed at each other. Almost.

"To an extent, I'm not very proficient. As I said, we transferred our languages to each other."

"Just languages? Doran, what else was shared between you two?" Miles asked with a hint of dread in his voice.

"Strictly language Sir, and certainly nothing that would breach the security of the UNSC, I assure you. The meld isâ€|how do I explain it. She cannot take information from me at will. I have to volunteer it."

Miles wasn't the least bit convinced, but again, this simply wasn't the time for the discussion of security breaches. Weapons were still drawn; he himself had one pointed directly at his head. Questions would have to come later. Right now, he was still concerned with ensuring that he lived long enough to ask those questions. Miles nodded, though he gave Doran a stern gaze that said 'we'll discuss this later'. Doran nodded back in understanding.

For the first time, one of the other aliens spoke.

\* \* \*

><p>Fealix wanted to curse himself when Alenna began to initiate the meld. Had he known she was going to attempt it when she stepped forward, he would have stopped her in her tracks. Perhaps if they were in a meeting between diplomats, or civilians, or anyone else other than this particular group<em>, <em>it would have been a good idea. These humans were isolated after all, which was the ideal condition to conduct a first contact learning meld. But something that Alenna clearly didn't understand was that these humans were

soldiers. And if they were anything like Turian soldiers, Fealix knew exactly how they would respond. Unfortunately, by the time he realized what she was doing it was already too late. Admittedly, he didn't know much about Asari biology, but he did know that disrupting a meld could be potentially dangerous.

And to confirm his worst fears, the human leader rushed forward to grab his crew member. Then things went from bad to worse as Liara biotically lifted him from the ground, no doubt to stop him from interrupting the meld. Soldiers rushed in drawing weapons; Saren drew his. Alenna and the human came back into consciences. A standoff occurred. Alenna exchanged words with the humans. He couldn't understand them. The human spoke briefly in an Asari dialect to Alenna. What was said almost made him chuckle. A sense of humor? They're not like Turians at all.

And now back to the tense standoff.

Fealix knew there was only one way to end this. Somebody had to lower their weapons, and hope the other side wouldn't start shooting. He knew Saren was a loose cannon, and a pitiful excuse of what a Turian stood for, which also made him a terrific SPECTRE. He currently had his weapon trained on the most important human in the group. If the aliens decided to shoot, their captain would most certainly die. Of course, so would we.

Fealix wasn't sure if he regretted allowing the SPECTRE to carry a side arm. On one hand, Saren drawing his weapon only added to the confusion. But on the otherâ€œif he didn't put the human captain in his sights, perhaps the soldiers would have fired on them. Perhaps it was the only thing that kept them alive.

He just didn't know.

As always when presented with difficult problems, he looked at the situation tactically. The humans had three well-armed, heavily armored soldiers going against one lightly armored Turian. There were only two options that could occur, either the humans lowered their weapons first, or Saren did. The former simply wasn't going to happen. If Fealix learned anything about these aliens, it's that they are incredibly paranoid. The latter was the only option that Fealix envisioned getting everyone out alive, though he didn't relish the idea of putting himself at their mercy. Still, what choice did he have? With three against one, anything else would be suicide. And after hearing the one called Kyle speak, he was put more at ease.

"Arterius," Fealix ordered. "Lower your weapon."

Saren didn't take his eyes off the human captain. "Sir, if I do that they could easily gun us down."

"I know that," Fealix replied hotly. "But do you have any other option? One that won't get us all killed?"

"Actually yes. I could hold their captain at gunpoint while everyone else retreats to the shuttle." The human captain was staring straight back at him with an intense stare. He had to give the alien credit, it didn't back down in the face of death.

"Option poses risk," Mordin said. "Even if we evacuate, still outnumbered by ship firepower. They could easily destroy shuttle. Still, just as likely to die here if conflict not resolved. More so, even."

"What, Leave? Are you all insane?" Alenna said incredulously. "We're just starting to make real headway. I can communicate with them. Saren, lower your weapon, they won't shoot."

"This isn't what I'd call headway, Alenna," Saren replied.

"I think they were just startled," Liara said, injecting herself into the conversation for the first time. "Alenna, when you entered the meld the human captain attempted to pull his crew member away. I've biotically lifted him to prevent any harm." Her eyes cast downward. "This is entirely my fault."

"No, this is Alenna's fault for initiating the damn meld," Saren was growing more frustrated by the second. It was times like these when he was reminded of how much he loved working alone, where no idiot partner could put his life at risk. "Don't you realize this is a military vessel? What the hell were you thinking?"

"I did what I thought was best at the time!" Alenna fired back. "And the meld was successful, mind you. All of this could end if you just lower your weapon."

"If you're so convinced they won't shoot us then ask them to lower their weapons first."

"They won't do that with you targeting one of them." Alenna paused to briefly look at Kyle, before continuing. "I think something happened that made their kind very paranoid. I don't know what, Kyle wouldn't divulge, but I think something very bad happened to their people."

"If they're as paranoid as you say, then that's all the more reason not to put our guard down," Saren said. "General, I advise you and the team retreat to the shuttle while I hold them off. Once onboard you can contact the fleet and have them send assistance."

Fealix looked at Saren, then back to Alenna, clearly contemplating the option.

"You can't do that!" Alenna half-yelled, half-pleaded. "General I am absolutely convinced that if Saren lowers his weapon the humans won't fire."

"For the last time, I'm not lowering mine until they lower theirs."

Saren refused to budge. Fealix in a rare moment looked indecisive. Alenna was outright pleading. Mordin was silent, hand on his chin thinking critically.

Liara could only look on with mounting dread.

\* \* \*

><p>Miles looked at Doran for an explanation, but a quick shake of

the head confirmed he couldn't translate what was being said. Not that he really needed a translation. He didn't have to speak their language or go through a virtual <em>mind-fuck</em> to understand what was happening. The aliens were feuding, and it was obvious what the source of that feud was about. The alien called \_Alenna\_ wanted the face-plate to lower its weapon, but the creature remained adamant in keeping Miles firmly in its sights. Miles probably couldn't blame it, hell, he might have acted the same way had he been in the alien's position. The feud continued; it was obvious that face-plate wasn't going to back down. Miles knew there was only one way this confrontation was going to end peacefully.

"Mitchell," Miles ordered the lead ODST marine. "Lower your weapons."

That got the attention of the \_Alenna\_, who was the only alien that could understand his language. She turned around to face him. The other aliens stopped feuding.

"Sir," Mitchell replied. "Are you sure, skull-face couldâ€" "

"I know Sergeant. My order still stands. Lower your weapons." The ODST's looked at each other in a moment of hesitation, before their ingrained instincts took over and they obeyed the order of their superior.

For the first time since the snafu started, the face-platted alien hesitated. It looked towards the other face-plate, and then to \_Alenna\_, and then back to Miles; its weapon was still drawn. Miles very slowly walked forward, stopping just a few feet in front of the alien, who looked decidedly more intimidating up-close. In an effort to hide his fear, he smiled, and then spoke slowly, knowing \_Alenna\_ would understand. "What is your name, friend?"

\_Alenna\_ translated what was said.

Miles couldn't be sure, but if he had to guess, he'd say that face-plate gave \_Alenna\_ his species' equivalent of a curious look. Eventually the alien replied in its native language. \_Alenna\_ translated as best she could.

"He says, 'My name Saren Arterius.' "

\_A male then. \_"Okay \_Saren Arterius\_.\_" He was sure he butchered the name. "I would kindly ask that you stow away your weaponâ€|or else," he added after a short pause.

Alenna translated, clearly growing more nervous.

It was a short reply. "Saren says, 'Or else what?'"

"Or else I'll take it by force," Miles responded with every ounce of sincerity he could muster. \_False sincerity, \_he bleakly reminded himself. \_I only know the basics of hand to hand combat; I'm certainly not proficient in it. And some of these aliens have mind powers. \_Yet another bleak reminder. He wished he was as confident in his ability as he sounded.

When \_Alenna\_ translated, \_face-plate did something strangely human; he scoffed. \_And an arrogant bastard too. \_

Alenna \_translated his reply, though she appeared to be growing weary with each passing exchange. "Saren says, 'I fought many beings in galaxy. Survive greater odds than you.' "

Miles' smile broadened. Strangely, this seemed to put face-plateâ€" Sarenâ€" in visible discomfort. "You have not fought anyone like us."

Alenna translated. Saren stared at Miles for a considerable moment. He said something, and then, thankfully, upholstered his weapon to his hip. Miles heard audible sighs of relief coming from both sides; the tension in the room deflated instantly. As if realizing everything seemed safe again, Heavier-Than-Others drifted out of his hiding spot and back into the group.

Miles addressed Alenna. "What did he say?"

"He says, 'maybe one day we fight, but not today.' "

Saren had retreated to the back of the alien group again. Miles leered at him uneasily. It's like that creature wants to fight. Is this a common trait among its kind, or is this just one hotheaded individual? Something for ONI to speculate about I suppose.\_

Alenna must have picked up on his perturbed state, because she said, "I no wish fighting." She smiled. "Citadel Council want peace andâ€|coâ€|cooperation."

"Madam, it is a relief to hear you say that," Miles responded earnestly. "This Citadel Council, it is your governing body?"

"Yes, it"â€"she paused, trying to form wordsâ€" "it seat of power of galaxy."

But not the whole galaxy, Miles inwardly thought. Outwardly, he said, "Well, I hope further meetings will be less confrontational."

Miles was about to ask another question when he was interrupted by Hev's soft gurgling noise it emitted whenever it was curious. The biological super computer drifted across the deck, oblivious to everything except his newfound object of interest. Apparently, that object of interest happened to be Doran's head. Hev, without warning, uncoiled one of its tentacles and wrapped it around the back of Doran's neck.

"Whoa Hev, what are youâ€"ow!"

The fine cilia of Hev's tentacle brushed against the small port of Doran's standard neural interface, producing a tiny spark as new data was rapidly downloaded. Satisfied that it had acquired everything it wanted, Hev made its way back to Miles. Like a child asking for candy, the A.I. presented a tentacle out front. Miles quirked a brow.

"Hmm, Hev just transmitted me an interesting message," Athena said over Miles' earpiece. "Captain, during this 'meld' process, Doran experienced extremely high neural activity, particularly in the Ensign's left frontal lobe. If what Doran said is correct then this

shouldn't be surprising, as that portion of the brain is responsible for learning language. I believe Hev might have found a way to lift Doran's newly learned data from his neural link. The implications are self-evident."

"Wait, it's possible to download knowledge from a neural interface?" Miles asked in surprise. The alien \_Alenna\_ looked at him quizzically. \_Right, she doesn't know about Athena. I might as well be talking to myself.\_

"\_I \_certainly can't do that," Athena answered. "But let's be honest Captain, I've yet to see what these Engineers couldn't do."

Hev still had his tentacle extended towards Miles.

\_The implications are self-evident. \_Miles detached his earpiece which served, among other things, as a language translator, and handed it to Hev. The super-computer took it from his hand, made a whirling noise, and went to work disassembling and re-assembling the piece in a span of seconds. When it was done doing whatever it did, Miles took the piece back and re-attached it to his ear.

Curiosity driving him, he turned his attention back to \_Alenna\_. "If I could ask, might you say something in your native language?"

Again, the alien looked upon him with a quizzical expression. But then she noddedâ€"nodded, like a humanâ€"and began to speak in her own tongue.

"I am the Captain of the C.E.V. \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_. I am an explorer and have travelled the stars in search of discovery."

"She saidâ€", Doran began to translate.

"I know what she said," Miles cutoff, smiling broadly. \_Hev, how did the UNSC ever survive without your kind? \_He addressed the alien. "Alenna; Captain, explorer, and traveler of the stars."

"You understood me?" she asked, still speaking her own tongue. Judging by her expression she was either surprised or intrigued, or both.

"Uh, Captain," a voice said behind him. It was Rosa. "I could understand that too."

"Me too," another crew member said.

"So could I," yet another.

The whole crew nodded in agreement, confirming that everyone understood the alien speech. Athena spoke, this time to the entire human crew, not just to Miles. "Hev took the translated data from Doran's neural interface and wrote a software patch for standard UNSC comm links. It downloaded the patch to your comms." The humans murmured in astonishment. Even after spending years around Hev, the biological super-computer continued to amaze.

Hev, for that matter, wasn't finished. It now turned its attention to the alien group. Drifting toward Alenna, it placed its tentacle on

the equipment piece it had examined earlier. Like before, she seemed hesitant, but didn't back away. An orange holographic interface surrounded Alenna's arm. A moment later, the same happened to the other aliens as well, much to their surprise. The datapad that Miles still absently clutched chimed. It was a message from Hev.

\_Have acquired full translation of all new organic languages. All UNSC comm links updated for crew. Have given Artificial Intelligence ATN 9286-4 Athena updated language software.\_

\_Have updated new organic software with all known human languages. Can communicate freely now.\_

Having accomplished what could have taken the UNSC months to achieve in mere seconds, Hev drifted back to its preferred spot next to Rosa. \_Incredible\_, was the only thing that came to Miles' mind. The aliens were fiddling with their holographic interfaces when he asked, "Can you understand me?"

The aliens stopped their fiddling and looked up at Miles in surprise, as if not believing what they just heard. It was Alenna who finally answered. "Yes, we can."

\_Awesome! Hev you rock. \_"Well then," Miles replied professionally, "now that we can communicate, perhaps it is best for a proper introduction. My name is John Miles. I am an officer on the United Nations Space Command and Captain of this ship, the UNSC\_\*\* Hades Gate\*\*\_. It is an honor to meet you."

After a moment of fascination, Alenna bowed as she had done before by placing her right hand over her chest. She replied, "Greetings Captain John Miles of the United Nations Space Command. I am Alenna T'Velos, Captain of the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_. This is my team, Liara T'Soni, Mordin Solus, General Fealix, and Saren Arterius," she gestured to each of them. "It is a privilege to me you. Despite theâ€|less than ideal circumstances that brought our people together, it is the hope of the Citadel Council for continued peace and cooperation with our peoples."

"Thank you," Miles replied. "That wish is also shared by my government."

"Who is the floating creature?" the lizard-looking alien called Mordin asked abruptly. "It is the only one among your crew that is a different species. Is it sentient?"

Though taken off guard by the sudden change of topic, Miles answered. "That's Hev, uh; its full name is Heavier-Than-Others. Its kind are called Huragok, but most people simply call them engineers. It is sentientâ€"in fact it's undoubtedly the smartest creature on the shipâ€"butâ€|they're not like us."

"Not like humans?"

"Not like organics," Miles corrected.

"How so?"

"They justâ€|fix things. That's all they care about; nothing else matters to them." Miles didn't feel comfortable freely giving away

information about the Huragok, even if it was basic knowledge that every kid in elementary school knew. He was already facing a potentially huge security breach with Ensign Duran; he certainly wasn't looking forward to that little ONI reprisal. Not wanting to take further risk, he tried to change the subject.

"I have to say, this has been the most bizarre meeting I've ever experienced."

"That, I think we can all agree with," replied the face-plate named Fealix, who was apparently a General. "Captain Miles, I'm General Baumgard Fealix of the Turian Hierarchy and Commander of the Dreadnaught \_\*\*Majestic Spirits\*\*\_. I wish to personally thank you for your assistance against the Geth. Had it not been for your actions, the situation would have ended much differently."

"I wish my superiors would share your gratitude," Miles responded.  
"Who are the Geth?"

The aliens looked at each other uncomfortably. It was the smaller blue alienâ€"Liaraâ€"who answered. "The Geth are a machine race created by another space-faring species, the Quarians. Unfortunately, as the machines became more advanced, they entered a state of self-awareness. The machines then declared war on their creators, driving them off their homeworld and nearly destroying them. That was centuries ago. Today, the Geth have isolated themselves from the galaxy, and any attempts to communicate with them are met with deadly force. This marks the first time they have left their own area of space in centuries," she finished.

\_Huh? Quarians? A hostile machine race? Its creators nearly destroyed? That's like something out of a bad science-fiction movie.\_ Rosa interrupted his thoughts, informing him that they were only minutes away from docking with \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_. He internally sighed.

\_Damn, I have so many questions ask them. What are these transportation devices? How do they work? What are, what did Doran call it, biotics? What is the Hierarchy? What is the Citadel Council?

-

"Understood Rosa." He addressed the aliens. "I am sorry, I have many questions to ask you, but I'm afraid our time is cut short. We are beginning to dock with the UNSC \_\*\*Light of Sol\*\*\_.

"\_\*\*Light of Sol?\*\*\_" Mordin queried. "This is the name of that colossal ship? Intriguing. Must ask, how do you move that ship without mass ripping apart? For that matter, how do you travel without element zero? Do you manipulate gravitational vertices of black whole? Have theorized myself that perhaps it's inter-dimensional in nature."

\_Damn, that alien talks fast. \_"I'm sorry, as I said, I have many questions myself. But now is not the time. We are currently in the process of boarding \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_. I'm sure our diplomats will be better suited to answer your questions."

The alien looked displeased with his answer. \_Well that's too bad. I'm not going to divulge information like that an unknown force.\_ Miles felt a slight, almost nauseating shutter that signified that his ship's internal gravity had deactivated, meaning they were now being pulled down by the gravity of \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_.

"Esteemed guests," Miles began. Well that sure sounded corny. "We have entered one of \_\*\*Sol's\*\*\_ docking bays. I will take you to our diplomats, but first," he gestured towards Saren. "I am going to have to ask your friend to leave his weapon, and any other weapons that you might be carrying, behind." This time Saren didn't make a fuss. He quickly stowed his weapon in the shuttle they had arrived in, then returned to the group. "Thank you. Please, if you would follow me." Miles, along with Duran and Rosa, lead the alien entourage to one of the ship's decompression chambers, where upon the other side awaited the UNSCâ€"and Sangheiliâ€"diplomats. Huh, Miles thought, I haven't even told them about the Sangheili, or any of the other races for that matter. Decompression and decontamination sensors were audibly hard at work.

Still, if they're feeling anything like I am, they're probably used to surprises by now.

A soft chime followed by green lights indicated it was safe to exit. The door opened, and before them stood two humans, one elegantly dressed Sangheili, and a rather dignified-looking Unggoy.

And behind them, a group of terrifyingly powerful-looking aliens of all kinds.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong> Because many have asked, I'm going to address an often posed question/complaint. It's been what? Over 80,000 words? Why are they just now meeting? Well, what I had originally planned (and still plan on doing) when I started this fic was to make a trilogy. This first fic is going to deal with first contact and its immediate after-effect. I won't divulge too much about the next two fics to prevent spoilers, but I will say they'll follow the adventures of Michael Shepard and his alien crew (both Council and Covenant) as they fight a new threat. I'm calling it the 'Clash of Civilization' series. This fic will eventually be renamed 'Clash of Civilizations: First Contact'. (I don't want to change it now to avoid confusion.)

I also admit I was a bit too ambitious when I started this story. I didn't realize how much time it would take to write. Don't worry though, I'm Not abandoning it. Not by a long-shot.

Also, do you guys realize that as of May, 7, 2013, you've made this the most reviewed cross-over of either series, the most reviewed Halo story, and essentially tied for second as the most reviewed mass effect story? Wow! I still find that hard to believe. You guys are just pure awesome. Thank you, everyone. Your reviews keep me going. Because I can't give you cookies over the internet, I'll give you a link instead. Check out my profile for the lolz.

One last thing, points for those who get what General Fealix's name references to.

Okay, one last last thing. Please check out 'Unbent, Unbroken, Unconquered' by Second Captain. It is an in-universe story based from College Fool's 'Renegade Reinterpretations' (one of my all time favorite fics).

## 20. Chapter 20: Sol's Soul

The great machine-intelligence watched over the untouched system as the primitive AI called Geth continued to build up forces by its command. Already the armada consisted of over 2300 ships, and more were being constructed continually and at increasing rates.

The machine-intelligence had boosted the Geth's programming exponentially, and upgraded their technology by substantial margins. But still, they were not ready. Not yet. More cultivation would need to be done. More pieces would need to be set into place. And more ships would need to be built.

So for now, the machine-intelligence would bide its time. Its kind was nothing if not patient.

In its infinite knowledge it knew it would not fail.

\* \* \*

><p>As soon as Alenna and her group stepped out of the decontamination chamber, they were greeted by a multitude of species, some of them <em>very large.</em> Foremost were two individuals centered in front of them, a human to their right and an alien they had never seen to their left. Both were adorned in elaborate looking outfits, and judging by their stance and demeanor it was clear they were important individuals. Alenna guessed these were the diplomats. Surrounding them were six individuals on each side, standing straight and attentive. A guard unit of some kind? Out of this group Alenna spotted three humans, four four-jawed aliens, three more squat aliens, and two enormous beasts. The latter were clad in metallic plating of some kind with \_no\_ discernable features beneath other than an orange mesh.

It was the human diplomat who stepped forward first. "Welcome Captain Alenna T'Velos of the \_\*\*Seloria\*\*\_. I am Sergio Augusto, ambassador for the Unified Earth Government representing humanity. I trust you can understand me?"

"Yes," Alenna replied. "It is an honor to meet you." She bowed. "On behalf of the Citadel Council, I wish to extend an offer of peace and friendship between our peoples."

The human ambassador smiled, but it didn't seem to reach his eyes. "Thatâ€¢is very good to hear. I surely hope this offer is sincere. Last time humanity made an encounter such as this it did not turn out so well."

Alenna wasn't sure how to respond to that. Did a war of some kind break out? It seemed the most likely conclusion given the debris field. But on what scale? Deciding that now was not the time to start prying for informationâ€¢that would come laterâ€¢she said, "Well, I do not know of such things. I can only guarantee you that our offer is quite sincere. The Citadel Council is the foremost power in the galaxy and has maintained peace for thousands of years. We are comprised of many species and have learned to coexist."

Strangely, this only made the smile on the human's face fade. "This Citadel Council, it claims supreme control over its domain?"

"I wouldn't quite put it that way. Our races are unified, however each species maintains its own anatomy and laws, and the Council always attempts to find peaceful and diplomatic solutions to any myriad of problems that are bound to occur in a vast mix of cultures. There are some laws and regulations that all species must follow to be part of this organization, but they are never forced. If a species wishes to remain separate, we respect that decision, though that rarely happens."

For a moment the human merely stared at her. Alenna got the distinct feeling that he was judging her, determining if she could be trusted or not. Just before the situation could become awkward, the ambassador said, "Well, if what you say is true, it will be great to finally meet a civilization with peaceful intentions."

\_Now\_ Alenna was really intrigued. That all but confirmed that a war broke out. It also explained why these people seemed so paranoid. If their contact with another race was anything like the Rachni, Alenna could understand why they would be hesitant meeting new species.

Before she could enquire farther, Augusto said, "Speaking of civilizations, I should introduce you to the representative of our ally."

The large four-jawed creature stepped forward, towering over her. It looked very reptilian in nature, and quite intimidating. The creature nodded his head. "Greeting Shipmaster T'Velos. I am ambassador 'Val Mdama. My race is Sangheili of Sangheillios. Behind me is my assistant Kalap, an Unggoy of Balaho. Those two over there", he pointed toward the hulking masses, "are Mgalekgolo of Te. The Unggoy and Mgalekgolo are client races to the Sangheili Empire. Together we represent the Unified Republic of Species."

\_Interesting.\_ A clearer picture began to form in Alenna's mind. These people were not united, or at least not as thoroughly as the Council. There were indeed two factions here; the humans and the United Republic of Species. She briefly wondered what that meant. If those two other species were client races of these Sangheili, then what did that mean for the balance of power? Was this relationship symbiotic like with the Turians and Volus? Or was this control by conquest? Did the humans have client races under their domain as well? She had too many questions and too little information for accurate conjecture.

Once again Alenna bowed to the Sangheili ambassador. "Greetings 'Val Mdama of Sangheillios. The Council's offer of peace extends to your people as well."

"The Sangheili Empire will never again submit itself to another power," Mdama replied quickly.

Alenna blinked at the statement. "We are not asking you too," she cautiously replied. "The Council only wants prosperous relationships. If your kind wishes to join us later in the future, we welcome all with open arms."

"That won't happen," Mdama said bluntly.

"Umâ€| "

"What ambassador Mdama means", Augusto interjected, giving what Alenna guessed was an agitated glance at his counterpart, "is that our histories give us reason to be weary of such powers. Perhaps you should introduce the rest of your crew."

Alenna knew that the ambassador was trying to change the subject quickly. Not wanting this first meeting to turn negative, she nodded. "Of course." She gestured to each of her crew. "This is Liara T'Soni, an Asari like me. This is Mordin, a Salarian. And these two are General Fealix and SPECTRE Arterius of the Turian Hierarchy."

"You are the general who defeated the overwhelming forces that attacked your people?" The Sangheili asked.

Fealix shifted unexpectedly, perhaps unprepared to be called out upon. "Yes, though only because I had competent and loyal soldiers."

Mdama stood straighter, reaching his full eight feet of height. "Impressive. Your actions are that of a true warrior. If we are ever pitted against each other, it would be an honor to fight you,"

"Uh, thanks, I guess."

Augusto spoke again quickly, once again shooting Mdama an agitated glance. "With introduction out of the way, perhaps we should take a tour of the ship."

"Yes, would like that." Mordin seemed almost jubilant. "Impressive ship. Very large. Am very curious."

"Mordin is a scientist, a common career among his people," Alenna explained. "New technology is very intriguing for him."

Augusto smiled. "Oh, I think you'll be quite impressed. Please follow me."

He turned and the group followed, now entering the Colossal megastructre. Alenna noticed that out of the twelve surrounding aliens lined neatly on each side, only two began to walk with them. Another Sangheili, though this one much slimmer, and a human in blue and black armor. The armor appeared much different from other humans, much sturdier, and he was much taller than any other human she had seen before. As they walked, the armored human briefly locked eyes with her counterpart, Liaraâ€"his face full of curiosityâ€"before continuing on in a purposeful stride.

\* \* \*

><p>When the group left to explore <em><strong>Sol<strong>\_, Captain Miles returned to his ship. Once in the hangar bay, he gathered his entire team and thanked them for their actions. He then told them they were cleared for shore leave for the next 24 hours. The \*\*Sol\*\*\_ wasn't just a warship, it was a moving megatropolis, with its own districts, parks, entertainment venues and restaurants. It even had an agricultural production facility. All of these things were necessary to maintain a crew of over 100,000 personal. Normally it would be odd to have civilians and shops on a warship, but

\_\*\*Sol\*\*\_ was simply too large and had too many people to exist without them. And the civilians that lived aboard understood the risks and went through routine exercises in case of an emergency.

As the crew separated, Miles' data pad chimed. It was a message from Admiral Hackett. He opened the message and read through it quickly.

\_Captain Miles,\_

\_Good work transporting the aliens to Sol. I read your report and saw the footage Athena sent me. The situation could have gone to hell quickly but you managed to resuscitate the situation through firm and decisive action. Your actions are befitting of an officer and I commend you for it. \_

\_These plated aliens concern me, particularly the individual who drew a weapon. My people will watch him closely while on my ship. More pressing however, is the potential security leak with Lieutenant Kyle Doran. ONI is \_not\_ happy, regardless of the kid's assurance that no sensitive information was released. And I have to say I'm skeptical as well. Who knows what that alien could have seen or done to his mind. ONI has requested that Doran report to their headquarters on Sol for a debriefing. But don't worry, I have ordered that one of my people be present during the questioning. I won't let the eggheads turn this into an interrogation. Doran is military and we look after our own.\_

\_You and your crew enjoy your shore leave. God knows you need it.

-

\_Hackett\_

Admiral Hackett's message filled him with both thrill and dread. Thrill to be complemented by one of the highest ranking officers in the UNSC, and dread for what might become of Kyle. Hackett said he would look after him, and all Miles could do was hope that the admiral kept his word. After all, it wasn't Kyles fault with what happened to him; he was just trying to be friendly. What would ONI do? Take him off his ship? Ferry him away to never be seen again? He wouldn't put it passed them. Miles determined that at that moment he would do everything in his power to defend Doran. It was \_his\_ ship and the crew was \_his\_ responsibility.

Miles glanced around. Many of the crewmembers were already leaving. He spotted Doran by himself, reading over a datapad with sorrowful eyes. Miles approached.

"Captain," Doran said. "Iâ€|I guess I made a mistake. ONI wants me to report to their headquarters."

"I know Lieutenant, I just received the news myself. And I'm going with you."

"Sir?"

Miles did his best to project confidence. "I'm not going to let these pansies in suits push you around like they own you. You're my responsibility and I determine if you made a mistake or not."

"But what if Alenna \_did \_trick me into revealing sensitive information? Isn't that treason?"

"No, treason requires either intentional action or extreme negligence, both of which are not present in this situation. No \_mens rea. \_No \_actus rea.\_ No guilt."

Doran nodded, though he didn't look convinced. "If you say so."

Miles raised his voice. "I won't let them remove you from my command. Now stop drooping and let's get this debriefing over with."

"Yes Sir," the lieutenant replied, standing up straighter.

Just then Heavier-Than-Others came whirling towards Miles. The engineer used one of its tentacles to grab the Captain's arm, desperately trying to get his attention. Miles stared back at the creature in confusion. Huragok weren't normally this frantic unless it involved protecting Forerunner technology, and Hev was particularly conservative even among its own kind. "Whoa, calm down Hev. What's wrong buddy?"

Miles' datapad beeped again. It was a transmission that Hev just sent. He looked back at the engineer quickly before reading.

\_Took skin cell samples from species designated Asari â€“ Alenna T'Velos. Species Deoxyribonucleic acid marker matches to human marker with 98.5924% accuracy. Indicates early Asari ancestry evolved on Erde-Tyrene now designated Earth. Distant Homo sapiens relative confirmed. Comparable data enclosed. \_

"What!?"

"Sir? What's wrong?" Doran didn't think a man's eyes could become so wide.

"Athena!"

"Hev just sent me the same message," the AI interjected over the intercom. "And yes, for the first time ever this all-knowing AI is baffled."

"But this can't be correct." Miles felt like his head was spinning. A new message appeared on his datapad.

\_We do not make mistakes.\_

"It \_would \_explain their remarkable similarity to us. At least, it's a much better explanation than convergent evolution. Nature doesn't work that way. The odds are simply too great."

Miles thought hard on the subject. Another subset of the human family existing in a different part of the galaxy? Living in a different civilization? It couldn't be true. He glanced at his datapad. \_But the evidence is staring you straight in the face. \_"How would this be possible?"

"Captain, with all of the recent revelations concerning the human race, is it really that surprising? Let's not forgot, it was only

four decade ago that we learned that humans once had an ancient empire that rivaled the Forerunners. Who knows what humanity's ancestors could have done? Or even what their enemies could have done. It is known that the Forerunners greatly meddled with the human genome."

As Athena's words sank in, Miles directed his attention to the Huragok. "Hev, do you know anything about this? Anything about the Forerunners that would explain this?" His datapad chimed.

\_No. Forerunner archives on Homo sapiens are extensive, but no records on species designated Asari. \_

Doran threw up his hands in mock frustration. "Okay, I'm thoroughly confused. Somebody mind filling me in here?"

Miles briefly glanced at Doran. "Lieutenant, follow me," he said, turning to leave the hangar quickly.

"Wait, where are we going!" Doran yelled, jogging to catch up. "ONI headquarters?"

"No. We're heading straight to Hackett."

\* \* \*

><p>The first thought to come to Liara's mind was open enormity. Before her spanned a hangar so large and so high one would be pressed to wonder if it had an ending at all. Occupying the first few hundred meters of the bay spanned a large contingent of military forces arrayed in precision formation. Most of them, Liara noted, were humans, adorned in the same kind of body covering armor they witnessed moments ago in the confrontation. But a close eye revealed that there were indeed other kinds of species within formation. A small group, perhaps twenty individuals or so, composed of the short, squat hunch-back looking aliens with large legs and arms and a breathing apparatus of some kind on their faces. Another group farther to the right revealed a slightly smaller group of the alien that had introduced itself as 'Val Mdama. On average they were much larger than humans in both height and body mass. If Liara had to make a vague comparison, she would say they looked like a cross between a Turian and Krogan. Directly next to this group stood four more of those hulking things. These beasts towered over everything. She could make out no discernable face, just an orange mesh between thick metallic plating. All in all, Liara estimated about 90% of the contingent consisted of humans, and the rest a multitude of different species. She decided it was a good sign to see unity among different species, though she filed the apparent human dominance away for her to conjecture over later.</p>

The military contingent was aligned neatly in rows and columns, leaving a wide isle straight through the center for the group to walk through. As they approached, one of the humans yelled, "attention on deck!" In unison everyone changed positions, standing straighter and bringing their hands to their foreheads in what Liara assumed was a salute.

"It is customary for both humans and Sangheili to greet diplomats with a show of military strength. The tradition goes back long before our peoples ever left our homeworld," Sergio explained.

"I understand," Fealix spoke up. "We Turians have a similar tradition."

The group proceeded through the bay, passing the soldiers as they went. "Does the military play an important part in your culture?"

"Absolutely. We have a strong warrior culture, though our ways are not brutal. To Turians discipline and order are central to our lives. Is your species a warrior culture as well?"

It was a question Liara was pondering herself. It wouldn't necessarily be bad if they were; the Turians were proof of that. Even the Protheans were thought to be a militaristic society. But there was a stark difference in how this cultural trait manifested itself. The Turians allowed this quality to give their society structure and order. Other species, like the Krogan or Yahg, let this quality control them completely, often dwelling in violence and savagery.

"That depends on who you ask?" the human diplomat answered, flashing an incredibly Asari-like grin. "I don't think most humans view their kind as a warrior species, though we are definitely no stranger to war, sadly." He gestured towards his reptilian counterpart. "The Sangheili, however, commit their entire lives to military discipline. Maintaining military honor is the single most important part of any Sangheili's life."

Mdama lowered its head slightly, perhaps their version of a nod. (Liara still wasn't sure what gender Mdama was). "It is true. A Sangheili would rather die than dishonor himself."

As they reached the end of the displaying soldiers, a full view of the bay became possible. Liara couldn't help to stare wide-eyed in wonder. Several kilometers above them revealed many ships in docking clamps, some of the quite large. But what really caught her interest was the platforms the ships were connected to. Layers upon layers of these platforms seemed to hang in the air without any kind of structural support. Some of them looked enormous, easily kilometers in length. Many of the platforms were slowly drifting from one area to another.

"What kind of ship is that?" Fealix asked, pointing to his far left.

Sergio followed his gaze. "That's a UNSC Autumn-class Heavy Cruiser. There are currently eight stationed in the \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_, " he explained.

Fealix nearly did a double take, and Liara could understand why. She hadn't thought of it before, but this Citadel-sized ship was large enough to dock Dreadnaughts in its bays. She, like everyone else, had thought the human and Sangheili forces that arrived consisted of twelve vessels. But how many more were stationed on this ship alone? By the size, it could easily be hundreds of combat vessels, and thousands of fighters. This realization sent a chill through her spine. \_The Turian forces in the system are hopelessly outgunned.\_

Though Liara was told to stay quiet, her curiosity got the best of her. "Ambassador, I have to ask, what kind of vessel is this?" Others in her team nodded their sentiment. It was a question on everyone's mind.

"The UNSC \_\*\*Light of Sol\*\*\_ is a human military vessel, though it is jointly crewed with the URS. It is one of a kind, and exceeds all other classification of warships. The crew consists of over 92,000 service people and roughly 12,000 civilians. The closest analogue to its function would be that of a Carrier."

"Carrier?" Fealix asked.

"A large vessel designed for transporting high numbers of ships, troops, and supplies to a warzone. Carriers are typically the largest ships in the UNSC fleet." Sergio continued. "At peak capacity, the \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_ can transport three fleets worth of UNSC or URS forces to any area of interest extremely quickly. It is by far the fastest ship we possess."

"So, the \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_ is less like a warship and more like a mobile military fortress, transporting fleets and armies to a warzone when needed," Liara affirmed.

"A glorified transportation vessel then?" asked Saren.

Sergio chuckled. "Yes, yes that's exactly correct. Though that doesn't mean \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_ doesn't pack a punch. Its main armament is the most powerful weapon we possess."

"Exactly how powerful?" Fealix enquired.

The group came to a stop upon a slightly raised platform, on top of which rested a strange-looking construct. It consisted of six long arches surrounding the circular platform, like an incomplete globe cut off at the top and bottom. The only other object on the platform was a holographic terminal. "Well," the ambassador replied, "we only ever fired it once at full power, at a barren, resource-poor planet. In hindsight, we should have enacted restraint."

"Why is that?" Liara queried.

"Because it ended up atomatizing the entire planet."

Liara's gut lurched. Both Alenna and Fealix looked disturbed.

"Destroying an entire planetâ€|I couldn't think of anything more irresponsible," Liara said. Doubtless Alenna didn't want to cause any friction with the aliens, but Liara felt compelled to express her opinion. For an archeologist like herself, preservation was among the highest of goals.

Sergio was about to reply, but it was a different human, the blue armored guard who kept sparing her glances when he thought she wasn't looking, that answered first. "When faced with extinction, every alternative is preferable."

Liara held the soldier's gaze for a long moment, and then examined him thoroughly. His eyes were crystal-blue like hers, but a much

lighter shade. His head fur was a sandy-yellowish color and cut quite short. The outline of his face was very defined might be the right word, a trait she noticed seemed common in the males. He was definitely tall, much taller than other humans she'd seen anyway. But how much was due to his armor she didn't know. She hadn't detected any malice in his gaze. Good. She didn't mean to offend anyone. Instead, he looked quite thoughtful.

After what seemed like an eternity, they broke eye contact when the human ambassador spoke. "Sometimes extreme action is necessary for the greater good. Our first destination will be for the \_Edifice,\_ he said, abruptly changing the subject again. "The \_Edifice\_ is the command center for the entire ship. There you'll meet Admiral Steven Hackett, commander of all \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_ operations. Everyone please ready yourself, slipspace translocation can be a bit unnerving."

"Slipspace translocation?" Mordin asked. "A transportation method of some kind?"

Sergio nodded. "Yes. \_\*\*Sol\*\*\_ is too large to travel through by conventional means. Portals are required throughout the ship."

Liara raised a brow. "Portals? What does thatâ€"whoa!"

The six surrounding arches lit up, and then an enormous bluish field appeared and enveloped the group. For a brief moment, all Liara could see was blackâ€"the deepest black she had ever seen. And then an instant it all went away. Her heart racing, she blinked furiously and looked around, only to come to a startling realization. They were no longer where they used to be.

For a few short moments, Liara believed they were now outside, no longer confined to a ship. There were trees, grass, running rivers, and exotic looking flora. She could feel a gentle breeze, the smell of nature wafting through the air. Many constructs abounded the area, but none so dominating as the large, silver-grey pyramid-shaped superstructure resting directly ahead of the group. Liara's eyes followed from the base of the structure to the very top, and it was at that moment that she realized they were indeed still on the ship. For high above rested not a sky, but a glass ceiling that emanated light. That structure must be the \_Edifice. \_And this area seems to be similar to the Presidium.\_

"Welcome to the \_Atrium Grounds\_, " the human diplomat said, spreading his arms. "Ahead of us is the \_Edifice. \_Please, let's continue."

Alenna's eyes were wide in confusion. "Is thisâ€|were we just \_teleported?"\_

"Yes," Mdama answered. "Do your kind even know what slipspace is?"

"Slipspace? Is that how you travel without the mass effect?" Alenna asked, finally beginning to regain her composure.

"I have never heard of this 'mass effect', " the Sangheili replied, arms folded. "It's very difficult to fathom another way to traverse the stars."

Sergio nodded. "Your method of faster-than-light travel is very odd; we have never encountered a way in which to travel in such speeds in real space, let alone negate the problem of time dilation. We instead travel between the stars by entering into slipstream space, a set of seven intertwined spacial dimensions which lie under the four conventional dimensional planes of existence."

"Knew it! Final proof of inter-dimensional transitioning confirmed. Know a few former colleagues who will be pleased," Mordin said with great enthusiasm.

"You mean, you're able to enter different planes of existence?" Liara knew Mordin had suspected as much, but she still found it hard to fathom. It seemed like something out of old asari science-fiction vids.

"Yes." Sergio answered. "Honestly, I'm very surprised your civilizations have never heard of this. To us, it is the only way we know that enables us to travel faster than light."

"Wait," Fealix said, bringing up his arms. "There's something I still don't understand. How do your people not know what element zero is? It's practically everywhere in the galaxy. It's pretty much central to all of our advanced technology."

Sergio shook his head. "I do not know. We find it very curious ourselves. The UNSC has traversed thousands of light-years and hold a great many worlds. But we have never encountered an element with an atomic mass of zero." They had come to stop at the base of the Edifice, to what liked like a lift not dissimilar from one commonly seen on the Citadel.

"Difference in technology surprising but logical," Mordin input speedily. "Our civilization relies heavily on eezo use. Technology evolves around it. Their civilization lacks eezo. Must find alternative means to achieve same results." He took a breath of satisfaction, perhaps enjoying the outdoor aromas. "Nature adapting to surroundings. Simple."

"That makes sense," Sergio agreed. He gestured towards the lift. "Please, this way. Admiral Hackett is very eager to meet you. After that, we can sit down and discuss how best to move forward for both our civilizations. I'm sure we all have many questions. I hope this will be the beginning of a great trade of knowledge and prosperity."

"As do we, Ambassador," Alenna said, entering the lift with her crew. As they ascended, Alenna fought to hide a grin. Teleportation? Trans-dimensional travel? The Council's going to flip. And the knowledge that these people, these humans, were genetic relatives of the Asari clung to her mind. It was scary and exciting at the same time; she constantly wondered how this would change things for her people. Could this be the greatest thing ever? A separated people coming together in harmony after untold millennia apart? Or could this somehow end in total disaster? She had desperately wanted to broach the subject to the ambassador, but the Thessian Council gave her specific orders not to. At least not yet. Either the humans didn't know, or they were making a show to hide it.

All of these thoughts were swarming through her mind as the lift finally came to a stop and opened. As they followed the ambassadors out, she half wondered what galaxy shifting revelation she was going to discover next.

\* \* \*

><p>Michael Shepard should consider himself privileged to be at the forefront of meeting a new galactic civilization, even if he was acting as a glorified security detail. But if he was honest with himself, he was having a hard time getting over the shock of the two blue aliens' appearance. 'Asari', they were called. They looked *so* *human*. It was almost disconcerting. He kept sparring glances to the one closest to him, the shorter one with a soft face and shy demeanor. He had viewed the photos in the debriefing, but seeing them in person was another matter entirely.

Michael was instructed to keep quiet. But when the small asari spoke of the morals of using the \*\*Sol's\*\* weapon, he felt obliged to respond. She didn't understand "couldn't understand" why such an option had to be enacted. Striking at the heart of the Brute's forward operating base had crushed the temporarily unified Jiralhanae from invading human space, dividing them into warring clans again.

Of course, even the UNSC was surprised at how powerful the weapon was. It didn't just vaporize the planet down to a molecular level, it destroyed every single Brute ship in its orbit. The once mighty Jiralhanae fleet, consisting of many Great War era covenant vessels, had been practically obliterated in one volley.

The asari at first looked surprised that he had spoken at all, and then he got the impression that she was examining him, like a researcher in a lab. It was only Sergio's voice that drew her attention away from him. From then on, it was through the portal, (which Michael admitted he found himself rather amused by their reaction), and up to the Edifice. All the while, he kept the plated aliens in his peripherals. He had been told these aliens were militaristic in nature, and that the tall, plain-faced one even drew a weapon at a UNSC officer in some kind of confrontation. Michael paid extra attention to him. He noticed the platted alien kept looking in every which direction, as if assessing the area for strategic purposes. Briefly, he wondered how well these aliens would stack up in a fight.

As the elevator doors opened, Michael locked eyes with his Sangheili counterpart and second-in-command, Stramus S'lorai. Since the N7 team was formed she had been vital for Michael in well, pretty much everything. Whether it was keeping humans and Sangheili from ripping into each other's throats, or gathering tactical information and strategy, she had become an invaluable resource.

He was also learning to read her mannerisms and body language quite well.

'You go forward. I'll stay by the door,' her eyes told him.\_

Michael nodded wordlessly. It was at this time that his AI, Aris, gave him an alarming warning through his ear peace.

His gut wrenched.

\* \* \*

><p><strong>AN:<strong> So, I guess an explanation is due for my incredibly long absence. To be honest, I really don't have much of an excuse other than the fact that life can really suck sometime. I moved back to the states and since then have had to work two jobs, about 75-80 hours a week, just to get by. Anyone who has had to do that knows how incredibly draining that can be. It's like my whole life consisted of work and sleep (because it kinda did). As you can imagine, I didn't have very much spare time to do anything, much less write, which does take me a lot of time.

Thankfully though, things have started looking up. I got promoted and can now afford to work just one job, which means I will have a life again. So expect me to start updating again. To everyone who has read, reviewed, and followed me, and can't express how grateful I am for your support and I appolgize prefusely for not updating for so long.

End  
file.